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# *Esther West*

Isa Craig, Mrs Isa Craig Knox



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ESTHER WEST.

(Knox :  
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*Frontispiece.*

**POLLY.**

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# ESTHER WEST.

A Story.

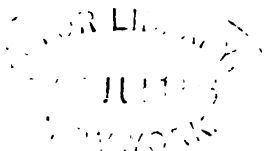
BY

*Mrs.* ISA CRAIG-KNOX.

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WITH TWENTY-FOUR ILLUSTRATIONS.

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# ESTHER WEST.

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## CHAPTER I.

### ESTHER THE QUEEN.

**H**URST COMMON was glowing in the golden afternoon. It was thickly set with furze, which was in full bloom. At a little distance, it seemed a field of black embossed with gold. Through the midst of it ran a broad green path, at one end of which, built upon a yellow sand-hill, stood a lonely house called "The Cedars," while at the other was the village of Hurst.

It was only two hours after noon, and the light that lay on the landscape had only gained in vividness from the touch of shade laid on here and there. But the low furze bushes cast no shade on that belt of shining green, soft as velvet, and elastic beneath the pressure of the feet. There was a pool at the village end, flashing like a mirror, and a flock of geese had risen from its margin, and, led by a mother goose of most goose-like solemnity, proceeded up the path, as if out for a constitutional.

From the other end advanced a young girl—a figure on which the light rested lovingly, as it rests on a water-lily. There was something singularly pure and cool about Esther West: and yet she was no slender reed of a girl, but a tall

and stately maiden, of ample proportions and perfect health. Perhaps it was to her proportion of face and figure, and also to a certain proportion of mind—which gave strength and calmness to all she did and said—that she owed her peculiar charm. I will try and describe her, for I do not hold with those who care not to paint the outward form. There was very little colour about her, yet she was not white. Though I never paint her mentally, but always sculpture her, if I may say so, she was not at all a marbly woman. Pure, tender greys predominated in her face; she had masses of shady hair, that was neither fair nor dark; long, lovely eyebrows of the same half-dusky hue, and grey eyes that seemed to swim in light, especially when they laughed. There was a great deal of shadow in the face; it was almost pensive in repose, but it lighted up marvellously when the grey eyes sparkled and the perfect nostrils quivered, and the mouth, neither large nor small, but of a gracious sweetness, opened, and yet hardly showed the pearly teeth.

Esther West came across the common in a cool dress of some light, shining stuff of silver grey, lightly trimmed with green. The white feather of her hat rested on the dusky hair. The sunshine streamed about her. She seemed to “walk in glory and in joy.” Her eyes shone their brightest, as she looked up at the blue above and down at the wealth of golden blossoms at her feet; her nostrils quivered as she inhaled the rich, sweet scent of the furze; her lips parted, and her whole face beamed with its brightest illumination. It was as if her young soul smiled back the smile of the Creator.

She came up with the flock of geese, who turned tail at her near approach, and waddled off in their ungainly fashion, and with much unreasonable cackling. At the pond they collected in a closer group, stretched their gossiping goose necks, and hissed insanely as she passed—a feat which she rewarded by a happy little laugh.

At this point she passed into the village, which nowhere formed what could even by courtesy be called a street. It made rather a sort of right angle, one side fronting the common, the other the high road. There was an inn. To the mere on-looker it was a mystery how it existed, the place was so quiet and retired. But the sign of "The Maypole" continued to swing in the wind on the grassy edge of the highway; and its owner did not complain of want of custom. Hurst was, indeed, more populous than it appeared. There were many little houses hidden away up green lanes and in among orchards and gardens; for Hurst supplied the London market with fruit and vegetables, and thrived in its vocation.

It boasted also of a shop—"the shop," which was likewise the post-office of the district, both concerns being under the management of Mrs. Moss, though "old Moss," as her husband was called, still overlooked the transactions by means of a little square pane of glass let into the wall, through which he surveyed the world from his chimney-corner in the back parlour, to which he was confined by "rheumatiz" and increasing years.

Out of the sunshine into that dark, low-browed little shop went queenly Esther West, radiant and happy, generous, and gracious, and good. After a cheerful salutation to Mrs. Moss, she produced a letter. It was for the Australian mail, and there was no need to ask about it, for each Australian mail bore a similar missive from the post-office at Hurst to swell the great stream of colonial correspondence.

"There's one a waitin' for you—that is, for your mamma, Miss Esther. I've hardly had time to look at it yet," said Mrs. Moss, wiping her hands on her apron, and proceeding to look over a little bundle of letters. "Joe is just gettin' ready to take the letters round," she added (Joe was her son, and did the tailoring of the village up in his attic, be-

sides his letter-carrying), "but maybe ye may like to carry it yourself. It's got the Australian post-mark on't." And she very naïvely had her look at it before she handed it over to its rightful owner.

Esther took it, hesitating just a little, and turning her face, as she inspected the writing, towards 'a little woman who stood in a corner, and who had stood back there since Esther entered the shop, with her sharp eyes fixed on the girl's face, and watching her every movement.

"Yes; I will take it," she said, after the momentary hesitation; and, with a kindly inquiry for Mr. Moss, she left the little shop, without having once looked in the direction of the small woman in the corner, partly out of pre-occupation, partly from good breeding.

There is no knowing what will please or what will offend some people. The little woman in the corner, who appeared to be dressed in every colour—not in the rainbow—was evidently offended that no notice had been taken of her; for as soon as Esther was out of hearing, she gave utterance to her verdict, with a sniff of her sharp nose and a screw of her shrewish little mouth.

"That's a haughty madam."

"No, she aint!" shouted the old man from his chimney-corner, causing the little woman to start in an irritable manner. The parlour door was left slightly open, and Mr. Moss not only saw but heard all that went on; for, unlike most old people, his hearing was preternaturally acute.

But Mrs. Wiggett, who was a new-comer, and not aware of this peculiarity, took no notice of the interruption.

"Who is she?" sharply interrogated the little woman.

"She's an only daughter," replied meek Mrs. Moss.

"She's a beauty!" shouted the old man. "Esther West—Queen Esther I call her."

"Esther West," repeated Mrs. Wiggett; and taking up



"'Yes; I will take it,' she said."





the letter, she read, "' Henry West, Esq.'—that's Harry, isn't it? Is he any relation?"

"They do say," answered Mrs. Moss, "that he's a cousin of Miss Esther, and that he's a comin' home to wed her."

"There might be two Wests, but there can't be two Esthers, and two Harrys, and two Australias," said Mrs. Wiggett, showing herself a great inductive philosopher, and adding, triumphantly, "I know all about them."

"Do ye now!" exclaimed Mrs. Moss, with genuine admiration and curiosity; for not much was known about the Wests in the village, nor did there appear much to be known about a widow lady of good means and good manners; who had led a quiet life there for so many years.

Mrs. Moss waited open-mouthed for further information; but it is doubtful if it would have been vouchsafed but for the interference of Mr. Moss, who once more lifted up his voice with, "I'm thinking, missus, ye've little to say about them; and nothing agin them."

Mr. Moss was one of those men who can never help making a fight for the veriest morsel of opinion, and who was always taking sides for or against every one who passed in review before the little square pane through which he contemplated the world. Little as he had seen of Mrs. Wiggett, he had made up his mind against her. "I'm agin that goody," he had said to his wife: "she's a little wiper, she is."

His tone of contradictoriness exasperated Mrs. Wiggett, and she burst out with, "That's all you know; but I come fro' the same place, and know all about them; and I can tell you"—and her voice rose as her irritation carried her away—"that Miss Esther, as you call her, hasn't any right to the name o' West, no more nor I have."

A "Ha!—ha!" from the back parlour still further excited Mrs. Wiggett; while Mrs. Moss exclaimed, credulously,

"You don't mean for to say that Mrs. West isn't an honest woman?"

"I do mean to say that she could be gaoled or transported any day for stealing of an honest man's child. Esther West is no more Esther West than I am; she's Esther Potter—Martin Potter's first—first of ten, and two of them twins; I knew her mother, Mary Potter, as well as I know I."

"Take care what you say, missis," was growled from the back parlour; and Mrs. Wiggett's excitement cooled down in a moment.

"You needn't repeat it," she said to Mrs. Moss, in a calmer tone, as she took up several small packets and departed, bestowing a deprecatory nod on Mr. Moss through the pane.

Mr. Moss had suffered a defeat, and was silent, ruminating on the strange communication, which somehow carried the stamp of truth. Mrs. Moss had lost all presence of mind to ask the ins and outs of the story, and was speculating wildly. As for Mrs. Wiggett, she went up the village shaking in her shoes, and wishing she had bitten her tongue off, rather than have given the reins to that unruly member as she had done. She had reasons of her own, sufficiently strong ones too, for wishing to remain incognito.

In the meantime, unconscious Esther, after hesitating another moment outside the shop door—as if drawn two ways at once—went on in the direction opposite from home, and towards a house on the other side of the village called Redhurst, where she was expected to join in a croquet party that sunny afternoon.

While she was still at some distance from the house, through the wicket-gate which opened into its shrubbery came Constance Vaughan to meet her friend. She had on a hat, but neither cloak nor shawl, and her light dress fluttered as she advanced, with her own eager motion, rather

than with the breeze. The girls met, and kissed each other, and then paused in the midst of the path.

"I hardly know whether to go back to mamma, or on to your house," said Esther. "Here is a letter I have just got for her, and I don't like to keep her waiting for it. I knew you were all waiting for me, and I came on with the intention of asking you to begin without me, and going back to her. Will you carry a message for me? Tell them I shall not be long in going and returning, and explain my absence. You might take my mallet for a while."

They were eager players, and the delay of the game was quite a serious affair.

"Couldn't we send a servant over with the letter?" said Constance.

"It's from cousin Harry," said Esther; which seemed quite sufficient to make it understood that it was too sacred to admit of its being entrusted to a servant's hands.

"Let's both go together," said eager Constance. "It is not far to 'The Cedars,' and they are sure to begin without us."

The girls stood where through the trees, and over the sloping shrubbery, they could be seen by the group assembled on the elevated lawn of Redhurst, and Constance insisted on making some telegraphic signals, by holding up the letter, and pointing in the direction of "The Cedars." The trees which gave their name to the house, could be seen from where they stood, stretching their dark, level boughs on the golden sky, the very symbols of rooted calm. The signals were quite intelligible and satisfactory to herself, and utterly incomprehensible to those to whom they were addressed; but a white handkerchief waved in reply was taken for a signal of comprehension; upon which they turned back deliberately, Constance linking her arm in Esther's, and fluttering gaily by her side.



## CHAPTER II.

### A LIFE'S HISTORY.

**W**HILE they are thus on their way, it may be as well to anticipate any further revelation through the medium of village gossip, and tell the story of Mrs. West's life in a clearer way—a story which, but for one great false step, might have been recorded in fewer words than most.

She was an orphan, remembering neither father nor mother, and married in early life to a manufacturer in the north of England. A woman who must have been made timid by the repression of natural affection in childhood and youth, for it was not in her husband's home that she learnt to distrust her power to win and retain the love of others. Her husband idolised her, childless wife as she was. She had more than the ordinary share of intellect, but her affections were stronger still, quite preponderating over the powers of her mind. Her tenderness was of the kind which even borders on pain in its intensity. After many years of married life, there came to her the promise of a child, and, even by anticipation, the love of the mother sprang up in her heart, with all the power of loving which characterised her.

Close to the gate of the grounds which separated her large and lonely house from the outer world, stood a pretty cottage, the home of a recently-married pair, which she had often

looked at wistfully as she saw the young mother fondle her first-born. When the little thing began to totter about in the porch, or on the small grass-plot in front of the house, the lady would stop to speak to the child and its mother over the low garden gate. But now she lingered longer, and almost trembled with joy to hold the yearling in her arms ; and, seeing her daily, the little mouth was held up freely for kisses, and a very lovely little mouth it was.

The mother of this child had been the village schoolmistress, and, herself remarkably handsome, had married the handsomest man in the parish, though he was only a brick-layer. Neighbours said she might have looked higher, their shades of high and low being of the finest ; but Martin Potter was intelligent and ambitious, and they changed their opinion in time. He was a student in his way, and a saver, and when he married he became a small master, and, with his wife still mistress of the school, they seemed prospering exceedingly. Then came the baby, and the mother's health failed for a time, and the school had to be given up, and the schoolhouse with it. But Martin built a pretty cottage for his wife and child, and worked harder for them, and seemed to love them more than ever.

A great disappointment awaited Mrs. West: her baby was only born to die. The little pale blossom fell from the tree of life fruitless, unexpanded. Very slowly the childless mother came back to life and health. When she began once more to pass the gate of her domain, there was little Esther, lovelier than ever, playing in the porch, and her (in Mrs. West's eyes) most happy mother with one infant in her lap and another in a wicker cradle at her feet : Mr. Potter had been presented with twin daughters.

At first Mrs. West had to be driven past her humble neighbour's door, with bent head, and clasped hands, and heart aching heavily. She could not have trusted herself

to speak ; though she blamed herself for every throb of what seemed so like envy, and doubled her pain by being pained because of it. But at length she had the courage to stop her pony-carriage, and step into the cottage ; and, with tears falling into the bosom of the little white bundle in her lap, pour out her sorrow to a sympathising listener. Mary Potter was beginning to have her troubles too, and expressed a very sincere wish, concerning the twins, that one of them had been Mrs. West's instead of her own. "Not that I would like to part with one now," she corrected ; "but Martin thinks it hard to have two at a time. He thinks he'll never get on at this rate." Thus poor Mary bared her secret hurt.

After that, Mrs. West would stop at the cottage door, and take little Esther up for a drive. And from that she got to having her at the house, where she was made much of, amused, and, what is even pleasanter to a very young child, instructed ; the instruction being confined, however, to the simple use of words. She was not two years old ; and the twins had left no room for her in the mother's arms—had "put her little nose out of joint," to use the common phrase ; therefore it was no wonder that she clung more and more to the gentle lady, who gave her a mother's care, and all the love that she was ready to have lavished on her own. More and more the unconscious little one was weaned from her mother and her home ; till one day, Martin Potter being employed on some repairs at "The House," Mrs. West made him a proposal to keep the child altogether, and to bring it up in her own home. "You are likely to have a large family"—Martin Potter thought it more than likely—"and you would never miss her ; while she would be amply provided for. I have consulted my husband, and I want you to consult your wife before you answer me."

"Oh, Martin ! it is hard to part with our own flesh and

blood to a stranger, even if she were an angel from heaven," pleaded poor Mary, hugging her twins.

Her husband briefly pointed out the advantages to the child herself, and to the whole family. Mr. and Mrs. West might die. They were neither young nor strong, and they would certainly leave a fortune to their adopted child.

But the more advantageous it seemed, the more it seemed to the mother to separate her from her child. She was weak and irritable, and not inclined to be reasonable about it. "She's our first," she sobbed; "and you've never taken to the twins as you took to her." She appealed to the father's joy in his first-born. The first and strongest link between them seemed about to be broken; but when Mary Potter found that nothing prevailed against her husband's resolution, she calmed herself, and said, "Take your own way, Martin; but, mind, it's against my will."

"Take your own way!" Sad and fatal words for either husband or wife to utter; the way that leads to many a dreary separation. Those whom God hath joined together have no longer right to a way of their own. Slowly but surely, Mary and Martin Potter diverged from that day. There had come

"The little rift within the lute,  
Which by-and-by shall make the music mute,  
And, ever widening, slowly silence all."

Mary had a little soreness against Mrs. West, but that in time wore away, while the soreness against her husband increased. Mrs. West was very good to Mary, especially when another baby came; she was good in a way which would have won harder hearts than this young mother's. It was a deprecating way she had. Anybody might have patronised Mrs. West, but she could not have patronised the poorest or feeblest. It was delicate, too. She did not present her humble friend with stout



flannel petticoats or serviceable gowns; all her presents were such as one lady might give to another. She worked for the twins, with her own delicate fingers, dresses of simple material, but dainty form and ornament, such as she would have had her own child wear, and such as she provided for little Esther; and she contrived, above all, that the mother should see her child every day, except when she was taken away for a few months at a time when they went to the sea for the benefit of Mr. West's health.

They took little Esther away, and they brought her back again more beautiful and blooming than ever, while the twins were weak, and fretful, and ailing.

Another daughter had been added to Martin Potter, who felt more aggrieved than ever at the Providence which assigned him the encumbrance of four of the weaker sex. Indeed, he could hardly be got to look upon the face of his fourth daughter. Esther seemed, therefore, wholly given up to her adopted parents; indeed, such had been the compact between them and Martin Potter, with the proviso that he should see her from time to time, and that he might claim her again if he chose.

Another winter drew near, and Mr. West was ordered to the south before it should set in. Mary Potter, expecting another baby, bade good-bye to little Esther without much concern, while Martin, keeping still better to his bargain, hardly noticed the child at all; but then he had borrowed money from Mr. West lately, who had said to his wife on the occasion, "My darling, I fear that man will be a trouble to us some day."

They stayed throughout the winter and the long, cold spring at Ventnor; but before the latter season was over Mr. West was too ill to be moved. Periodically Mrs. West wrote to the Potters concerning their child, and received at equal intervals a letter from Mary. Number five had turned out

a boy; "but," wrote poor Mary, "nothing will please him (her husband), for the business seems going wrong." And Mrs. West sent the boy a handsome sum of money as a gift from his sister Esther, in answer to the intimation.

Just before the summer, Mr. West died, leaving all that he possessed to his wife, and after his wife to the son of an only brother in Australia. The will had been made, according to their mutual wish, years before the adoption of Esther, and had remained unaltered. "You will take care of the little one," the dying man had said, for he had come to be as fond of Esther as his wife was. I fear you will find it a hard task to keep her, and I don't quite like Martin Potter, but it would be cruel to give her up now."

Give her up! Mrs. West would have given up most things in this life—after her husband's death, life itself—rather than have given up the clasp of those chubby arms, the kiss of those pretty lips, the love of that warm little heart.

Then came the great temptation to which she yielded. The Potters left the place where they had lived so many years for a neighbouring town, where small building speculations were rife. Mrs. West sold her house and furniture through an agent, and thus broke the tie with it at the same time. Still she remained at Ventnor, but poor Mary grew remiss in writing, and after a longer interval than usual, the fatal step was taken—fatal, at least, to the peace of poor Mrs. West. She removed from the Isle of Wight, and came into the neighbourhood of London, without communicating to the Potters her change of address. Her late husband's nephew and heir had been sent to England for education, and she gave to herself the reason that she desired to make a home for him during his stay. By this, also, she accounted to herself for her frequent changes of residence. She was always finding out a better school for

Harry. After three years, the young Australian was recalled, having spent a year at three different schools. He was a bright, handsome, fair-haired, restless boy, and, to do Mrs. West justice, the frequent changes were as much his fault as hers. He needed a discipline far firmer than any she could enforce to repress his erratic tendencies ; but he learnt so rapidly and retentively, that what would have hindered the progress of most lads only seemed to favour his, and everybody seemed satisfied with the result. Little Esther was Harry's playfellow, or rather plaything, during those years. He alternately loved her and broke her child-heart by his neglect ; but then he was her senior by six years, and it was not to be expected that a boy could make a companion of a mere baby of a girl. So the only memories cherished of Harry by Mrs. West and Esther were pleasant and happy ones.

Finally, Mrs. West—all trace of the Potters lost—had settled at Hurst, and Esther had grown up, knowing nothing of her origin, and loving her whom she called mother with an undivided love. Her memory carried her back to Harry, and to many a little incident of his stay with them, and especially to the day of his departure. It had been a tradition of her childish days that he was to come back and marry her when he grew a man ; and though it was a long time since any one had reminded her of it, she still remembered the promise and the day when it was made : the great ship, and being lifted down into a little boat, and stretching out her arms towards Harry, standing waving his cap round his sunny head, and laughing at her tears and terrors.

She might have remembered things still further back, even so far back as her parting with her mother, but the memory is capricious in respect of events which occur before one is five years old. It retains only the merest

fragments, and if these are broken off completely from the after series of events and actors, they are speedily effaced.

The completeness of her success in the appropriation of Esther, had cut off Mrs. West from any retreat from her false position. If the child had remembered anything, something might have been explained, and a truer position assumed; but how tell the loving and trusting girl that she had no claim to her love and trust! It was too late! Often repeated words of saddest significance, "Too late!"

Mrs. West's hope lay in Harry. She, too, remembered his boyish promise, and counted eagerly on its fulfilment. When he came back—and he was coming soon—she would set all right. In giving up the love, for whose sake she had sinned, she would unburden her soul of the secret under which it had so long lain trembling. Everything was left till Harry came; then Esther's future would be secure; then she would seek out the Potters, and make amends for the past. And at length the time for all these things was at hand.





## CHAPTER III.

### THE GAME BEGINS.

“**H**ERE they are at last,” said Kate Vaughan to her sister Millicent, as Esther and Constance again came in sight.

They had not begun their game, as Constance anticipated, but had sat there waiting for the truants, and speculating on the cause of their absence. The many-coloured mallets and balls lay on the grass at their feet. The gentlemen—namely, their father and their father’s friend—had strolled to the top of the garden, and were engaged in discussing some topic of the day; and the young ladies were not a little impatient of the delay which had occurred.

They sat in the sunshine, with a background of roses, which clustered all over the front of the house. There were roses single and in pairs—roses by threes and fours and half-dozens on a single spray, laying their heads together like girlish gossips. And the sisters did not lose a whit by that background of bloom. They were themselves as blooming as the flowers; indeed, they had been named in the neighbourhood the Redhurst Roses. The three sisters were perfect marvels of youthful beauty; the beauty which consists in freshness, and bloom, and all the gloss and glow of health. Their light summer costume was as fresh and fair as themselves; and as they sat there, ready for their favourite game, in their gay little hats and



"They sat in the sunshine, with a background of roses."



coquettish boots, they looked like pretty birds who had plumed themselves from pure love of daintiness.

Yet they were dainty with a difference. The sisters, in outward appearance so like—so like in their colouring and in the softness and fairness of youth—were in reality very unlike in character. The unlikeness was, as yet, only slightly indicated in the outward appearance; still it was there already apparent, and in process of development. The hats, with their white feathers tipped with blue, were all alike; but they were worn with a difference: Kate's with a slightly imperious air; Milly's with a sweet humility; and Connie's with a careless, roguish grace. Kate would wear a brooch where her sisters wore only a ribbon. Kate would also choose her colours a shade brighter, and lay on more of them, than the others; so that now, bright, hard blue predominated in her attire over Milly's greys, just lighted up by the same hue. Milly's dress also flowed round her in softer folds; and Connie's had the misfortune to soil and spoil the soonest.

Kate's hair had a golden ripple in it. Her lips were the reddest, and her eyes the brightest of the trio. She was also slightly inclined to *embonpoint*, dimples forming in the corner of her mouth, and softening the outline of a firm proud chin. Milly was altogether paler and fairer, with more delicate features, and a more slender frame. Her greatest beauty lay in a pair of lovely blue eyes, which it was no exaggeration to call heavenly. They suggested saintliness; and there was, in truth, a deep strain of tender, religious feeling in the nature of Millicent Vaughan, which corresponded to the outward expression.

As for Constance, she was less ethereal than Milly, and less luxuriant than Kate. She threatened to be rather large and bony, both in face and figure, and she had no scruple about tanning her bright skin in the sun. It was a graver



face than either of her sisters, though it seldom looked serious. There was humour lurking in the eye and in the corners of the somewhat large mouth, a something of sweetness which Kate's dimples and Milly's serene smiles failed to yield.

But the individual characteristics of the girls were as yet overlaid with the softness and the bloom of youth, and of youthful happiness. They were, indeed, very happy. It seemed as if they had grown in that garden, enclosed and defended from every blast of ill. Nothing had ever come to stunt or to blight these richest growths of nature. Yet they had been out in the world. They had lost their mother early, and had all been sent to school, while their father lived a bachelor life in London. But as soon as it was possible he had had his girls home, and installed the eldest as housekeeper at Redhurst. At home they had greater freedom than most girls of their age, and a wider culture. Their father, a literary man of high standing and of small independent fortune, made friends and companions of his daughters. They read with and for him. Each had her own opinions about books and things. Each had also her own ideal of life.

The young housekeeper's ideal was a fine house and good society, with all their adjuncts of luxurious living—a brilliant and bountiful life, which would help to develop her into a brilliant and bountiful woman, if only it could be attained without any hardening process—for Kate was capable of hardening. It was a mystery where she got some of her worldly notions, for the home atmosphere was thoroughly unworldly; Milly's ideal, for instance, being the life of a hardworking curate's sympathising helpmate.

Between two elms, which stood at the foot of the garden, and made the landscape look like a picture in a frame, the girls, as they sat in front of the house, could see a wide

stretch of thoroughly English country beyond the bright, breezy common, bounded by its sandy wooded hills. Esther and Constance came on in quite a leisurely fashion. "I can't think what those girls get to talk about. Only see how they creep along, arm in arm. I do wish they would make haste."

There was an almost vexed impatience in Kate's tone as she said this. Then she sighed, and through the singing of the birds she was answered by a great sigh that swept through the hearts of the elm-trees. The girl was sighing to begin her game, and there was something in her impatience which signified that of the young heart weary of uneventful living, and longing to go forth and meet with mortal fate. Kate sighed, and rose and went toward her father and his friend to call them to their posts on the lawn.

Mr. Vaughan was a literary man; not of the fast and loose kind generally to be found figuring in modern novels. He was a man of good education, of high honour, and of pure life; all, in fact, that a man should be who presumes to teach the truth—be it the truth of science or of life—to his fellow-men. He was open-minded and open-hearted; and who shall say how many a man in his profession fails for want of the latter, who has no lack of the former; whose clearest insight is at fault for want of a little of that charity which never faileth? His fine and subtle mind, unlike most of the finest minds of his contemporaries, was unsceptical in its tendency. His difficulty would have been not to believe, could it have been possible for him to be convinced of the intellectual necessity for non-belief. His difficulty, believing as he did, being as he was a Christian man, in all manliness, was not that he could not believe more, but that he could not believe less. His friend, Herbert Walton there, called him an optimist; and would fain

have convinced him that things were not even so good as they seemed, and very far indeed from being better, as he believed.

"Yours is a delightful philosophy, Vaughan," his friend would say; "but with rampant folly everywhere triumphant—to say nothing of wickedness—I can't see how a man like you can hold on to it. Your cheerfulness is simply unreasonable. It sometimes strikes me as positively insane."

"It is quite true that I do not see wisdom and goodness everywhere triumphant," Mr. Vaughan would reply; "but I see in everything the intention that they should. You will own the inherent weakness of folly, the inherent misery of sin. All I have to do is to see that I range myself on the side of that intention, and strive to carry it out to the best of my ability."

At which Herbert Walton would shake his head, proclaim the forts of folly invincible; but own that, if they were ever taken, those who came after would find his friend's body by the wall.

Mr. Walton was a journalist, and spent most days of his life in a dingy London office, working conscientiously in his vocation. He went into society as part of his work; his recreation was generally solitude. Unlike Mr. Vaughan, he was apt to take the gloomiest possible view of things. Whenever it became evident, from the tone of his writing, that he had become more than usually savage in his mood, Mr. Vaughan arrived at his office on Saturday afternoon, and carried him off for the next two days to Redhurst; and the public benefited greatly, as well as Mr. Walton, the result being a series of more cheerful and more digestible articles for a week to come.

This friend of their father's was a great favourite with the girls. They read up all that he wrote, and were ready to come down upon him whenever he broached any par-

ticularly dismal theory. He brought them news of the great world, even to the last new style of hairdressing at his last fashionable party. "The Watch-dog" was the name he went by among themselves; and personally he had a great resemblance to one of those trustworthy animals, being dark, and thick-locked, and strong-browed, with a pair of mournful, kindly eyes, that had often a wistful look in them, in spite of their angry fires.

The girls had taught Mr. Walton the game of croquet, and very proud they were of his proficiency, and of the general docility which he displayed. He was always ready, for instance, to take for partner the young lady assigned to him, and to do her bidding by coming up to her assistance when sent by adverse fate to the furthest confines of the ground. But to-day, when he had followed Kate to where Milly was seated, he proposed himself on her side.

"But we are the worst players of the lot," said Milly; "both on one side, we shall be sure to lose the game."

"I don't like to be too sanguine," he answered; "but I mean to win if possible."

There was a wistful look in the dark eyes as he said this, which Milly did not notice.

Only Kate laughed, and said, "You are growing quite independent, Mr. Walton."

"I hope Constance will give up Esther to us, then," said Milly. "We can't have you, papa. You, and Kate, and Constance are more than a match for us, for Connie plays well when she pleases."

Thus it was arranged just as Esther and Constance came up together.

"What have you two been about?" said Kate.

"Didn't you understand my signals?" Constance replied.

"Not in the least," said Kate; "we only saw that you

turned back with Esther, and that you had something in your hand."

"It was a letter for mamma," explained Esther. "I got it at the post-office, and was coming on to ask leave of absence to take it to her when I met Constance. We hoped you would begin without us."

At last the game began in earnest, for the afternoon was already somewhat advanced. The shadows of the elms were lengthening eastward on the grass. For the next hour or two there was much running, and laughing, and prompting, and very little conversation. Only it had gradually passed from one to another of the little circle, till all were aware of the fact, that Esther's Australian cousin was coming home by the next mail.





## CHAPTER IV.

### OUT OF THE GAME.

**I**T was a well-contested game. There were many skilful moves on both sides ; many a ball neared its goal only to be sent to the furthest corner of the field by an expert enemy ; or, even at the winning post, found it necessary to go back in order to bring up lagging friends.

"It is easy for one to go on alone," said Mr. Walton, who had been unexpectedly successful ; "bringing up others is the hindrance."

And back he went to bring up Esther and Milly, who had fallen into the hands of their enemies.

"It's very ungrateful of you to complain," said Kate. "Think of the number of times I have had to bring you up."

"Ah, that's only human nature !" said the cynic, who seemed, however, to be enjoying his work.

"Besides, it would be no use winning alone," said Milly ; "that is, you could not win alone, but only put yourself out of the game."

"What I would be tempted to do in most cases," he replied.

"Ah, Walton, that's it," said Mr. Vaughan ; "those who would win the race of culture alone, leaving half the world behind them, will find that they have not won after all—have only put themselves out of the game ; or else they will have to go back and bring up their fellows ; they will

have to go generations back, if need be. It's one of the conditions of the game of life, that we can't win alone."

But this time Mr. Walton was on the winning side: he, and Esther, and Milly got the game. When it was over, the party scattered into groups. Kate stepped through the open window of the drawing-room to dispense the afternoon tea, which was laid there; and Mr. Vaughan went up to Milly, and drew her away from the rest with a look of unusual tenderness—insomuch that she looked at him questioningly, and said, "Is anything the matter, papa?"

Nothing was the matter. Garden chairs were found for the whole party, who seated themselves forthwith, while Kate and Constance handed cups of tea out of the window.

Then they began to talk of the Australian, and to club together the scattered information they had obtained from Esther concerning him, while they were playing.

"He is rich," cried Kate, from the tea-table.

Mr. Walton laughed.

"And young," said Milly, innocently. A remark which, somehow or other, quenched the light on the dark face beside her.

"And handsome," said Constance, in playful mockery.

"And you are all ready to fall in love with him," said Mr. Walton, "for all these qualities in combination."

Thus they chatted on, as if life were a summer holiday; and the shadows of the elms lengthened on the grass, and the western sky began to glow.

Then Kate declared that Mr. Walton had had six cups of tea, and should have no more on any pretext whatever; and Esther hastened to say good-bye to her friends, that she might be home in time for dinner, for which the others dispersed to dress.

Esther took her way homewards in the evening glow, with its strange, transfiguring light shining on her face, and

bringing out its latent pensiveness; and she was aglow from her innocent enjoyment, aglow with the gladness of the present, and the bright anticipation of the future. The great event of the day, the announcement of her cousin's return, was still in her mind, had been in her mind all the afternoon, and was perhaps the cause of those gleaming eyes and that pensive mouth.

To deep and thoughtful natures all great joy is serious. The greatest joy has something of awe in it. And this was a great joy. Not that Esther looked upon her cousin in the light of a lover. Mrs. West was too delicate a woman to have presented him to the girl in that light; but he was her hero. She remembered the bright, handsome, impulsive boy, and pictured him perfect in his manhood. His letters were so frank, so vivid, so full of life, so unlike all that she saw or knew of the lives of men, so much more manly, that he seemed to her the very man of men! How noble he was in his simplicity, beside some of the literary men she had encountered at Mr. Vaughan's; the sulky young poet, who had taken her down to dinner, and had never once spoken to her, being entirely occupied with his great grievance, an adverse review in the *Athenæum*; or the enthusiastic one, who had effectually prevented her from getting any dinner at all by speaking the whole time, and leaning the while with his spectacled nose right over her plate; or the young man of the period, sublimely indifferent to everything in the universe except himself. What a real life it seemed to her, riding over those wide western runs, driving home the herds of wild cattle, counting by thousands, and tens of thousands, more life-like, and better worth living than the lives of any of the men she knew. Thus had her young imagination been impressed with pictures of a patriarchal life, and in the centre of the pictures there figured a kind of shepherd-king in the shape of Harry West.



Just then, as if to reproach her with her sweeping depreciation of his sex, there rode up a young man of elegant figure and thoughtful face, who reined in by her side, and saluted her with a respect which had in it a touch of chivalrous devotion. She returned his salutation frankly, and he walked his horse by her side for the few paces which would bring her to the entrance of "The Cedars." She walked with her eyes cast down, not from him, but from the light that fronted them, so that he was free for those moments to peruse her face, an opportunity of which he availed himself with ardour. At the gate she looked up, and bade him good-bye. His admiring glance was restrained in a moment. She had not seen it; nevertheless, she made a reservation in favour of her neighbour, Benjamin Carrington, when she passed sentence on the young men of her acquaintance.

Esther found her mother—for so, for the present, we may call her—just as she had left her, seated in her favourite window, looking out among the cedars, her letter still in her lap.

"Mamma, darling, you look as if you had never moved out of the spot," said Esther, gaily.

"And I do not know that I have," she answered, still letting her eyes rest on the level boughs, and the lake of molten gold which seemed to swim behind them. She used to say they stretched out their arms to her, as if to bless her with their peace. Alas! it was long since the gentle heart had known peace. All the difficulties in which she had involved herself were present to her mind. She had poisoned for herself the fountain of her happiness, as, in one way or other, so many of us do; and the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, the pure and peaceful Spirit of God, could not come unto her, because she had no will to put the evil thing away.

"I am so glad Harry is coming," she said at last, looking up at Esther.

"I shall be quite jealous of Harry," said Esther, jestingly.

"It is not that you are not enough for me," she answered, hastily and nervously. "My own!—my own!"—she almost sobbed as the girl knelt at her feet. "If you and Harry should love each other, my heart would be at peace."

She had never said anything like that before; and she said it now because she was overwrought by the emotion of the last lonely hours.

There was silence in the room after the words had been said; the silence of a reverie which neither seemed to care to break.

Strangely enough, that very afternoon Mrs. West had thought of Mrs. Wiggett, of whose neighbourhood she was quite unaware. Not, however, by her present name had she remembered that little woman, who had a hidden history of her own, which might have remained hidden too, but for that fatality which comes upon some people who live themselves in very crystal palaces, in the shape of an uncontrollable mania for throwing stones.

The weight always pressing on Mrs. West's spirit had been heavier than usual that afternoon. In vain she had tried to banish it; to forget its very existence; to say to herself, All is, and shall be well. It was there; it would not be banished: it boded, or seemed to bode, some coming ill. It was as if the very air bore to the sensitive soul the slightest tremor of approaching fate. A dread of some unknown impending evil, which might pass her by if she could only cease to dread. As if Fate were a piercing eye, which she might elude if only she had the strength to resist the fascination of looking that way! To such a height had

the miserable feeling risen, that Esther's unexpected return with the letter was almost more than she could bear; and her heart still beat with sickening faintness as Esther knelt on at her feet in silence.

It was Esther who broke the silence at last. "I feel as if I could never love any one as I love you, mamma," she said, kissing the fair thin hand.

"Do you think you would love me as well if I were not your mother? if—if I were some one else?" said Mrs. West, bending over the girl with an almost agonising look.

"What a strange question, mamma!"

"Esther——"

The name sounded faint and far away, as if it had been uttered by the last breath of a departing spirit. What might have followed remained unspoken; for the fragile speaker lay back in her chair, and quietly fainted away.

There was no painful fuss and flutter over the fainting form. Esther rang the bell for her mother's maid, and stood holding fast the frail hand, while some simple restoratives were used. The first sign of returning consciousness was the pressure of the thin fingers. She seemed to keep hold on life by that firm young hand which held hers in its anxious clasp.

Mrs. West, after lying down for a little while, appeared at dinner as usual; and Esther and she spent their evening together in light work or reading; Esther instinctively keeping aloof from any topic that might excite her companion.

But there was a vague trouble in her heart; and when her mother had retired, as she did at an early hour, she carried the lamp into a little room beyond, and sat looking out upon the cedars, with the cool night air fanning her forehead, and the silver sickle of the new moon hanging over the dark, solemn trees.

That same silver sickle hung over the garden at Redhurst, and witnessed a new birth there—the birth of love. All the stars came out and gazed and trembled over it, and the flowers sent up their sweetest odours, as if breathing the secret to the stars. The thing was so new, so sweet, so strange, so sudden, nobody could tell exactly how it came to pass, not even Millicent herself, who was the subject and the object of it, except that she devoutly believed in its heavenly origin, and took it as sent from God.

As far as can be told, this is how it came about : Herbert Walton, during those summer days, had drawn very near to Milly, and had drawn the unconscious girl very near to him. On the evening after the game he sat next her at dinner, and contrived to surround her with a kind of isolation, as if there had been none there but he and she alone. Neither could have told the precise moment when heart answered heart under the mysterious spell which it needs no words to weave. Only when the ladies left the room, Milly, the serene and mild, had grown shy, conscious, and blushing under the gaze of half-triumphant love. Then, when her sisters had settled themselves to read, she took a book in her hand, and wrapping a light shawl about her pretty figure, stole out into the garden. But she was not long alone. She was followed to the leafy nook she had chosen, and caught like a timid bird. And Herbert spoke of himself and of his aspirations, and how often they were chilled and quenched in the world, needing just such inspirations as she could give. And the girl who, as a child, had known, and loved, and looked up to him, thrilled through and through with wonder and with tenderness, and the familiar home-garden changed in the starlight into that Eden which still awaits on innocent and happy love. With every pure sense drinking in the enchantment of the hour, Milly and her lover lingered beneath the stars, and she listened to the

fond reiteration of a passion which had suddenly transformed her life, till her fair head sank upon her lover's shoulder, and she trembled into happy tears.

"Papa has gone into the library alone," said Constance, returning from a search for a book she wanted. "Have you noticed, Kate, in what an extraordinary manner the Watch-dog has been prowling about this time? I declare, there he is at the top of the garden, and Milly with him! I can see by her white dress. They look exactly like a pair of lovers."

"I wish, Constance," said Kate, "that you would not speak such nonsense."

But the younger sister's quick sympathy was roused, and in spite of the repulse, she went up to Kate and whispered, "Oh, Kate, I am sure it is so—dear, dear Milly!" Then the two laid aside their books, and waited with a tender trouble in their hearts.

But Milly was too shy to enter the now lighted room where her sisters sat. "Your father knows it already, my love." This assurance had comforted her concerning him. While they lingered, the bell rang for prayers, and Milly and Herbert stole, side by side, into the dimly-lighted library, without word or comment, seeing they met for a sacred purpose. Side by side they took their places in the family circle, and their first act was kneeling together and mingling their voices in the universal prayer, an act in which the heart of the slightly world-worn man became as the heart of a little child. And somehow it became known to all the household that Milly and Mr. Walton were engaged.

And when Milly went to the room, it was Constance who followed her, and held her in her arms, and heard the shy confession of her happiness, and filled up the great need the heart has of being rejoiced with in its joy—a need far keener and deeper in most hearts than that of being wept

with in sorrow, but one to which only the most tender and generous natures respond.

"Child," said Milly, looking in her sister's face, "I seem only to-night to have found out your love as well as his. And where is Katie?"

Kate was with her father in the library, alone with him, and giving him more pain than he could well account for.

"I thought Mr. Walton had been too poor to marry?" she had remarked.

And her father had answered, "Well, he is not very rich, Katie; but he is one of the ablest men I know, and high-principled, too, as well as able. I think Milly ought to be proud of his preference."

"And where are they to live?" asked Kate, in the same hard tone.

"In a cottage as near us as possible; somewhere that will allow Herbert to go in and out daily."

"I think Milly has thrown herself away," said Kate.

"What do you mean by such a speech as that, Katie? You do not mean that loving Herbert—as she must have done, or why should she have accepted him?—she should have held herself back for a higher bidder. I cannot imagine a happier lot than has fallen to Milly. Oh, my child, do not give me cause to fear that you are less worthy of such another."

And at this little speech, tender as was its tone, Kate had felt herself aggrieved, and had retired to her room with considerable heart-burning. She was vexed with Milly, who had been quick to perceive her want of sympathy, vexed with her father, and vexed with herself. Her heart was troubled and stirred to its depth for the first time, and she felt something very like vexation that Milly should be what she considered out of the game—settled down as a poor man's wife.



## CHAPTER V.

TIMOTHY WIGGETT.

**W**HEN Mrs. Moss joined her husband in the back-parlour, after the departure of Mrs. Wiggett, she looked the very picture of gratified curiosity as she exclaimed, "Well, did you ever hear the likes o' that now?" The defeated Moss gave a prolonged growl, which ended in the articulate words, "No, an' if ever I hears you repeatin' a word o' what that little wiper has said, it'll make me go nigh to layin' my stick across your back, missis!"

Mrs. Moss thought it very hard: and what harm had she done, to be spoken to in that way? It was hard that she was not to be allowed the benefit of priority of information. Her extensive experience in matters of village gossip led her to believe that priority was all she had obtained, and that the news would be over the whole place before the week was out.

But Mrs. Moss's experience was destined to fail her on this point. For the present, Mrs. West's secret depended on the ability of Mrs. Moss to hold her tongue, an ability which was certainly little to be trusted, except under the influence of that keen supervision kept up through the square pane and open door of the back-parlour. Even if the door had been shut, Mrs. Moss durst not venture on forbidden gossip under "the master's" eye. He would have seen her speaking, and have "knowed" all about it directly. So the worthy gossip comforted herself with the

thought that she would at least have the satisfaction, when the story came round to her again, of saying she knew it ever so long ago.

Meantime, Mrs. Wiggett had gone home and confided her discovery to her lord and master, and the result had been a warning not to burn her fingers with other people's broth—a warning which might not have had much effect upon her, but that it coincided in a remarkable way with certain qualms of her own, in respect of her want of reticence.

Timothy Wiggett was as big and good-natured as his wife was small and shrewish. Not that Timothy was by any means what is called in country phrase "a soft"—a man easily put upon; on the contrary, he could be both firm and shrewd, only his health was so perfect, his juices so bland, his feelings so comfortable, that he found it impossible to put himself out of temper. Mr. Wiggett was brown as a berry—a clear, ruddy brown. He had the clearest of brown eyes, and the nuttiest of brown hair. Brown, indeed, seemed his favourite colour, for his coats were brown, too, and he generally wore round his great throat a soft brown silk handkerchief, such as are used for the pocket, with a border of yellow. His face was broader than its length, when his hat was on quite ridiculously so; he had a very broad, thick nose, and a very long mouth, with a slight droop at the corners, which betokened melancholy, but quite falsely, as it seemed. His hands were broad and fat, so fat that his forefinger nearly buried the thick gold ring he wore, with T. W. engraved on the square signet.

Yes, Timothy Wiggett, market-gardener, was sleek and well-to-do, and Sally Brown had done well for herself in the long run. She had risen in the world, since the days when she and Mary Potter had been companions in one of



those girlish friendships which take place between the most unlike and unlikely people. She had fitted herself very well with Mary's old shoes, people said ; for it was well known that Tim, the gay young gardener, had loved the gentle Mary—but that was long ago, and Mary had married, and her disappointed lover had gone away to push his fortune.

Then Sally, who would have given her eyes for Tim in those days, married too, a young man who was a fellow-worker with Martin Potter, who had set his mind upon going out to Australia, but who cared enough for that quick-witted, smart-tongued, bright-eyed little person, which Sally then was, to give up what he considered his prospects in life, and settle down with her in a cottage next door to her father and mother's. Sally's parents were both old people, and nearly past work. They had no other child save her, and she stoutly refused to go out to Australia and leave the old folks at home. She was a good and faithful daughter, for all her sharp tongue, but she did not make Ned Brown a good wife. "He hadn't the way with her," that was how the old folk explained it to themselves. At any rate, he became dissatisfied, resenting having given up so much and got so little. If she had brought him a child, it might have made a difference ; but she did not, and Ned began to get sullen. He did not relish having to work for his old companion Potter, who seemed to be rising in the world. One day, working on a job of his, they quarrelled, and he came home declaring that he wished he had gone to Australia. "If you go, you'll go by yourself," his wife had said. "You know my mind well enough. You've known it all along. I never would have married you, nor any other man, to leave father and mother alone, and be banished over the sea." The result of such speeches was, naturally, keener irritation and increased resentment, and at length it came to

such a pass that Ned Brown resolved to go alone. He softened as the parting drew near, and tried to excuse himself by saying, "The best of my days are goin' by, and I'll lose my only chance. You'll come out to me, Sally, when the old folks go."

But the old folks were in no hurry to go. They had their daughter again, and Ned was forgotten. He wrote several times, and with difficulty, for he was no scholar, as Martin Potter was. The answers he got were not much to his satisfaction, not likely to keep the lamp of love burning in his heart, and at length he ceased writing altogether.

Seven years slipped away, and nothing was heard of Ned Brown. "Be sure he's dead," said the gossips, attempting to console the forsaken wife. "An' if he isn't dead, he ought to be," grumbled the old father. "But my Sally's quit on him, anyhow; for it's the law of England, that if a man runs away from his wife, and she hears nought on him for seven years, she's free." The old man did not quote his authority, but he devoutly believed in this reading of the law—"it only stood to reason," he said.

At last Sally donned a widow's cap. Ned Brown had died in exile. The old mother was dead, the old father in his dotage, his daughter supporting him by the labour of her hands, as village dressmaker. Just then Timothy Wiggett was on a visit to his native place. He came, with other stalwart sons from other parts of the country, to bury his own old father, the patriarch of the village. He had found the place sadly and sorely changed, all but Sally Brown, on whose bright hard face the years had made little impression.

It was difficult to say what attracted Timothy to the little woman. Perhaps it was the fact of her constancy to her parents that touched him. Perhaps it was her struggle with adverse circumstances. Perhaps it was the conscious-

ness that she had cared for him in "the old times" that would never come again. Whatever it was, the prosperous bachelor was attracted to her, and she became Mrs. Timothy Wiggett, much to the astonishment of everybody not concerned, who envied the quick-witted little dressmaker for having accomplished her end at last, Ned Brown, now "poor Brown," having opportunely taken himself out of the way.

Timothy made Sally a better husband than his predecessor had done, and she, in return, made him a much better wife. It was all the better for her that her spouse was not in love with her in the way her young husband had been. Such a love is by its very nature exacting; and though Sally would have suffered any amount of exaction from her present husband, absorbing love is also sensitive, and she could not, for her very life, have kept from irritating. As it was, she failed to irritate Timothy. When she got out of temper, he only soothed and petted her. His love was too disinterested to find fault. He had pitied the brave, forlorn creature, and he pitied her still.

She had carried her old father with her to her new home, but he did not long survive the change. And when the old man was gone, Sally, in want of some one to rule, as she had been accustomed to rule him, set to work upon her big, burly husband. But it would not do. At first, he had played with her usurpations of power, as Gulliver might have played with a bumptious Liliputian; but he got the better of her entirely at last. One fair-week he had been out oftener and longer than usual, meeting the farmers and gardeners of the neighbourhood at the "Peahen." It was the time when he generally felt bound to be at home, but just because she had gone beyond bounds in her animadversions the last time he had stayed, he stayed longer still.

Mrs. Wiggett sat and fretted by her childless hearth.

Supper was prepared for Timothy—something savoury which he loved—but she left her share untouched, and waited on. She sent the sleepy servant off to bed, and got wilder and wilder as the hours went on and he did not come. Then her grief rose to anguish—to a kind of tragic passion of love and fear. She feared all sorts of improbable events taking her Timothy, her big, generous, manly Timothy, away from her, or taking away his big, generous, manly heart. Love was throwing its illumination into the dark and crooked corners of her heart, where she read that she was unworthy of him. She seemed to see a handwriting on the wall against her, which seemed to bid her dread that one day her kingdom would be taken from her. She put out the light, and sat on in the dark. If ever he came back alive, she wished that he might find her dead in her misery. She poured out wild, but true prayers, for his safety and her own sanity.

There he was at last. She knew his subdued knock at the bolted door. Instead of hastening to open it, she rushed upstairs to the room above, and opened the window. Yes, there he was, safe, and sound, and happy, by the tone of his voice, crying, "Why don't you open, Sally, woman?"

Her anguish had vanished on the instant, and in its stead this strange creature experienced a fit of ungovernable anger. She put her head out of the window, and cried, "Is this a time of night for respectable people to be coming home? You had better go and sleep where you came from."

"Come, come, Sally, don't go too far," he called out firmly; but the very instant a flash of humour, if any one could have seen it, passed over his face, and he added, "Very well, there's the pool; I had better go and drown myself."

Her reply could not be heard. The night was cloudy, and the moon, riding clear every now and then, was quenched in clouds, like a wave-whelmed barque. The pool, with its group of willows, was only a stone-cast from the house. Thither strode Timothy, with a great chopping-block that stood near the door, borne in his arms. Just as Mrs. Wiggett opened the door, there was a tremendous splash. The clouds closed over the moon, and the waters, to Mrs. Wiggett's distracted ear, over the body of her husband. "The drink has maddened him," she thought, "and this is the answer to all my fears;" and she flew to the edge of the pool, only to see a dark object bobbing up and down in it.

Behind the screen of willows Timothy had stolen back to the house, a merry thought, born of spiced ale and warm blood, in his head. He would turn the tables on the little woman, get inside and lock the door, and ask her if this was a time for respectable people to be abroad. But he had not reached the house when a despairing cry and another splash broke the stillness of the night, and with a shout which made the dogs bark down in the village, Timothy rushed back to the pool, to find that his wife had thrown herself in, after him as she believed.

Happily, at that moment the moon came out and hung over the troubled pool, enabling Timothy to lay hold of Sally, and drag her out of the water, which was of drowning depth in the centre. Her head had come in contact with the chopping-block, which it had been her aim to reach, and when dragged out she was quite insensible, and had to be carried back to the house in her husband's arms. There was a fire in the kitchen, and Timothy did what he could, sending off the maid for the village doctor. But a long and severe illness was the result. The comedy had very nearly turned out a tragedy.

During this illness there had been tender passages between the husband and wife. Her very smallness called forth the big man's tenderness. He could carry her about like a baby. Her complaints went to his heart as the fretful complainings of a child. He loved her better than before—this creature who seemed so unlikely either to gain or to keep love: and she did not try to coerce him any more. She found out that he was easier to lead than to drive, and because the story of Tim's drowning had got wind in the place as a good joke, she persuaded him to leave it, and had her own way. He found a large garden in the neighbourhood of London to lease. It suited him exactly, gave scope for his enterprise and skill greater than he had yet enjoyed; and so the Wiggetts had come to settle in Hurst.





## CHAPTER VI.

### THE OLD LOVE.

**I**N this June weather Mr. Wiggett had more than enough to do. He had to be up betimes, superintending his men in digging and preparing the ground for the later crops of vegetables, earthing up peas and beans, and making celery ridges, and thinning turnips, onions, carrots, and beets. At the more delicate operations he worked with his own hands, thinning his thickly set apricots, keeping the mildew from his peaches, netting his cherries, pitting his cucumbers, pegging down his verbenas, and trapping the earwigs on his dahlias.

Over night the great wagons were piled up as high as the house, with their loads of cabbages, &c., and sent off long before the peep o' day in charge of an under-gardener and the wagoner, who seemed to have the faculty of sleeping on his feet. The wagons would fall into a line in one of the narrow streets approaching the great market; and the wagoner would sit down on the trams of his cart, and begin to wake up and exchange salutations, flavoured with bucolic wit, with his mates. While still in the small hours the master started off, with a fast trotting horse and a sleepy lad to hold him, in a wagonette, filled with picked and carefully packed strawberries, or whatever fruit was in season, for the tables of the luxurious in the most luxurious and most squalid city of the world.







“‘How should I guess?’ she answered, sharply.”

One morning in the week following Mrs. Wiggett's discovery, Timothy set off as usual, promising to be home by dinner-time, meaning by that a little after the hour of noon. But dinner-time came and passed, and he did not make his appearance. This delay, however, was evidently not considered a delinquency. The repast, a cold one, was proceeded with, and a portion laid aside for the master, while the mistress went about her own particular business, which just then was the troublesome one of rearing a tribe of turkey poults. The master never neglected his business, and as every hour of the day was precious at this season, something in the nature of business must have detained him.

There he was at last, bowling up the uneven grassy lane, rising in his seat to look over the tall privet hedge, and through the plum trees into the yard beyond, where his wife was scattering a last handful of corn to the common fowls, who had had to wait till their more aristocratic companions had dined on chopped liver and other delicacies.

"You're late, Wiggett," said his wife, waiting his dismounting at the door.

He assented, more than usually silent; and he was not at any time a talkative man. It was not till he had sat down to the table and lifted his knife and fork, that, pausing in the act of helping himself to a huge angle of meat-pie, he fixed his eyes on his wife and asked, gravely, "Guess who I met to-day?"

"How should I guess?" she answered, sharply.

"It was somebody you know better than me," he rejoined, in a tone of mock mystery.

Mrs. Wiggett at once became irritated, almost to the verge of passion. "You always were fond of tormenting," she burst out, beginning to flush and tremble with her excitement. "I don't see the fun of it myself."

"Come, come, Sally, I didn't mean to put you out," said her husband. "It was Mary Potter."

"Mary?" repeated Mrs. Wiggett, with her eyes fixed on her husband's mouth, waiting for more.

"Ah, and lookin' but poor, I can tell you, poor, an' toiled an' moiled, wi such a brood o' young uns as you could scarce count 'em. I wouldn't have known her, but I saw a white-faced bit of a lass stoop down among our feet to pick up a daisy that somebody had dropped, when one o' them big, lumberin' market women came by, and planted her great dirty splay foot right on the top o't, knocking the little thing clean over. I thought the woman had trodden on the fingers, and gave her a good shove, and the little un' cried with fright, for she wasn't hurt. Then a tall woman came up and stood over her, and said, 'What's the matter, Mary?' and I know'd the voice was Mary Potter's, and then I know'd the face was hers too."

"What was she doin' there?" said Mrs. Wiggett, who had not evinced much delight at the discovery of her old companion.

"She had promised the children a treat for many a month," she said, "and that was to take them to Covent Garden in the summer. There were two little chaps carrying a basket between them, and a taller girl with another little un, a three-year old or so, in her arms. The little chaps seemed jolly enough, but Mary and the girl seemed terribly tired."

"And how did she like meetin' you again like that?" asked Sally, who knew more about Mary than her husband did, though she had lost sight of her for a year or two.

"I don't know that she liked it at first. She looked quite white, and staggered like, up against one o' the fruit-stalls."

"Is she stoppin' in London then?" was Mrs. Wiggett's next question.

"She's been stoppin' there this year or two. I've been to her place."

There was no further response from Mrs. Wiggett than the interjection, "Oh!" She was waiting for more still, her husband meanwhile eating and talking at intervals.

"I was just comin' away, and Mary looked so tired, that I offered to drive them all home in the wagonette; and the young folk looked so happy over it, that she didn't like to say no." Mr. Wiggett did not add that in going to order the wagonette, which he always put up for an hour or two, he had brought back sundry baskets of his own strawberries, and a handsome nosegay for the little girl who had tried to rescue the daisy.

"Well, I thought at first it was a goodish place they lived at—out a broad road—Belgrave Road they call it, and past the grandest of houses and the Queen's palace; but it's all outside, London is; beside the big houses that you see, there are little ones you don't see, stuffed away behind backs to hide their poverty; and such stuffin'! hardly room to turn in the places they call back-yards; the very weeds won't grow in them. In one o' them little houses the Potters live; the yard was full of Martin's things. Mary keeps a little school, which pays the rent. And how they all manage to live there, I can't make out. There's nine beside their two selves, and four o' them girls. But she frets after the other one yet."

"And you told her?" broke in his wife, eagerly.

"Well, I was very nigh telling her, when Martin comes and stops me."

"How did he stop you?"

"He looked so sour, I began to think I might make more mischief than I could mend. The little one danced up to him wi' a bit flower in her hand, and he looked as if he did not see her. She shrank away behind our backs, and

the two little chaps slipped out as if they were afraid of him."

In truth, Mary Potter had told him, with bitter tears, that Martin was not fond of his children. He looked upon them as burdens tied round his neck, that had dragged him down, and kept him down. He was a disappointed man, who hardly cared to struggle, since the struggle could no longer better his position, though it could have rendered it more comfortable, especially to his wife and children.

Martin Potter had speculated and failed, and speculated again, till he could do so no longer; not being considered a safe man. The cause of his failure was not want of ability, but want of capital; and he could not see that the want of capital incapacitated him from holding the position of a master. He would build blocks of houses, and he built them on nothing—a rather insecure foundation, for his fortunes at least.

Having failed in more ambitious efforts, Potter had become a jobbing builder; working when he had a job, but not with spirit: for his spirit was hankering after what he took—miserable delusion!—for higher things; and strolling about in a discontented fashion when he had nothing on hand; never, when idle, offering the slightest help to his overburdened wife, even to the extent of taking the children out for a walk.

The bitterness between him and his wife had increased with their increasing burdens. Mary had never forgiven him for parting with their first-born to a stranger, even with the provision that she should be allowed to see her child as often as she chose. He had not bestirred himself to recover Esther, when it became clear that Mrs. West had broken the provision, and had taken her away. It was years now since her name had been mentioned between them, but the whole transaction had rankled in Mary's heart.

And indeed her lot in life was a rather hard one. All the little nameless offices which a tender father in Martin Potter's rank of life renders to his wife in the care of their offspring, were either neglected or grudgingly performed. She had constantly to take the children's part against their father, to smother their complaints, to screen their faults from his harsh judgment, when she would gladly have claimed his aid in correcting them. For instead of each child bringing love with it, each child of poor Mary's seemed to bring with it the reverse of love, as far as their father was concerned.

It was Martin Potter's general notion that the world was over-peopled. A very prevalent notion this, and a very terrible one—a loveless, godless notion—the saddest sign of a corrupt and effete civilisation. There is room and to spare in God's fair, large world for all who are sent into it, if the room were only fairly ordered. Some take up the notion because they want to grasp and to keep so much to themselves—chiefly the selfish rich ; some because they will huddle together, and snatch at what is nearest to them—chiefly the selfish poor ; and others from cowardice and poverty of thought and imagination. Room, room to grow, to become strong and able men and women, capable of moral self-restraint, and all other noble and generous things, is what we want, and then, the more the merrier. Martin Potter's special idea was that his particular abode was over-peopled, and in that he was right. And that man's strong right arm and active brain might have won for his children a larger and fairer heritage—would have done so, if he had not been the merest self-seeker. The power would have come with greater love ; it did not come with newer light—of Martin Potter's kind.

Mary was a quiet woman, not wanting in personal dignity, and her heart must have ached sadly before she had been

betrayed into a complaint against the husband of her choice. It did indeed ache, with a long, dull aching that was telling both on body and mind, and undermining the naturally robust and calm constitution of both. It was neither the labour she underwent for her children, nor the teaching of her little school, which was making her droop, like a pink hollyhock whose stem has been bruised. The close rooms might have had something to do with it, seeing that Mary was country-bred.

The twins, tall, thin girls, were learning the dressmaking and millinery, and Mary's chief help was in her fourth daughter, Sarah, the pale, tired-looking young creature, who had been carrying her youngest brother when Mr. Wiggett encountered them.

When Timothy had concluded the main facts of this story and his meal at the same time, he said, not without a slight hesitancy, "You'll be glad to see Mary again, won't you?"

"Is she coming here?" asked his wife, in a half-startled tone.

"I promised to drive her and some o' the little ones out next Saturday, if they'd meet me at the market. We've plenty room, and the fresh air will do 'em a world o' good."

"And will ye tell her where Esther is, then?"

"I'll think o' that; that's why I put it off to Saturday next. I can't think all on a sudden; I would like to do for the best."

Mrs. Wiggett murmured something about children being more trouble than even turkey poults; but at the bottom of her heart she desired to see Mary Potter, especially in the changed circumstances of both; still she had a vague fear of Timothy's old sweetheart, and the recalling of times long gone by, with all their mistakes and disappointments.



## CHAPTER VII.

### THE INEVITABLE.

**L**EAVING her quiet, thoughtful Sarah to keep house in her absence, Mary Potter took her two youngest, Mary and little Johnny, to meet Timothy Wiggett, as appointed, at Covent Garden Market, and be driven over to Hurst, to stay there till Tuesday morning.

The two little ones were in a state of the highest glee, which had the effect, just then, of still further saddening their mother, though she was glad enough to see them enjoying themselves, too. Mary would not have left her post, even for three days, but that she felt her strength failing in the struggle—the struggle to be the cheerful, kindly house-mother she felt that she might have been. It was the “might have been” that haunted Mary; what Martin might have been to her, and she to him. The sad thoughts had been getting the better of her lately, marring her naturally sweet and gracious temper. For the sake of her children—her unloved, and sometimes she could not help thinking unlovely children—it behoved her to keep up. Away for three days, she felt as if she could calm and smooth her ruffled spirits, and get peace into her heart.

She was very silent during the long drive; but her voice was hardly missed in the incessant chatter of the children, who had thrown off all their first reserve towards Mr. Wig-



gett, in the delight of rapid movement, to which the crack-  
ing of his whip so evidently contributed.

Mrs. Wiggett was waiting for them, in a black cap with pink roses and velvet streamers, and a gown of plum-coloured silk. She held out her hand to Mary, mentally exclaiming, "Can that be Mary Potter, who used to hold her head so high?" And Mary stooped to kiss her, as she used to do when a girl; but the face she stooped to was no longer hard and bright—it was only hard and coarse. The change struck her sensitive spirit, without wording it even to herself, and she burst into tears. The two little ones clinging to her gown looked gloomily at Mrs. Wiggett, Master Johnny going so far as to clench his fist at her as the cause of the calamity, his mother sobbing aloud, with her face hidden in her hands.

Sally's not too tender heart softened towards her old companion, who took on in this way at the sight of her; and Timothy, with a queer sensation in his nose, which caused him to emit some extraordinary gruntings, laid his broad brown hand on her shoulder, and comforted her in an inarticulate fashion, so that Mary was not long in recovering her self-control, and declaring that her cry had done her good.

Mrs. Wiggett did not take to the children, and naturally the children did not take to her; but Mr. Wiggett did, and so he soon carried them off with him into the garden, where he encouraged them in the eating of a quantity of fruit, which it would have made their mother pale with alarm to see them dispose of. Then came the early substantial dinner, after which Timothy enjoyed a short period of calm repose; but the restless little creatures, who had already taken possession of him with the sure instinct that he was their slave for the present, body and soul, would not suffer him to rest. He was trotted out again and set to work, they desiring nothing better than to watch his every movement.

And while the little folk were thus employed, the two matrons paced quietly along the well-kept walks, in the afternoon sunshine, talking of the days of o'd. Mary, in her dark-brown dress, with a slight structure of cheap black lace tucked in somehow behind her ears and falling to her throat, looked handsome still. The throat was still white and round, and the fully developed figure had a grace of its own, a sober dignity, which contrasted with the woman at her side; the fair brown hair was yet long and abundant, and only beginning to be sprinkled with grey—a woman who looked fit to be a good man's bosom friend—a mother whom sons and daughters might have been proud of and thankful for.

On the Monday following the last Saturday in June, Mrs. West was to give a dinner-party in honour of Milly Vaughan's engagement. Indeed, they were going to make a day of it, for there was to be a pic-nic in the woods first, to finish up with the dinner in the evening; in all of which arrangements Mrs. West was only a consenting party, for Esther and the Vaughans had planned the whole, and on Esther fell the burden of the necessary preparations. There was not much of a garden at "The Cedars." The ground about the house was laid out in grass, which, with the fine trees about the place, both Mrs. West and Esther preferred to gay parterres. And now, when the latter wanted flowers for the rooms, there were not enough for her purpose. Wanting to purchase some, and also fruit, she applied to Mrs. Moss, and Mrs. Moss sent her on to Mr. Wiggett. Therefore, on this Saturday afternoon, while Mary Potter and Mrs. Wiggett were pacing up and down the garden, Esther was on her way to it in order to make her purchases. Esther was not driving; for Mrs. West was with her in the pony-carriage, and was going further on for her daily airing, while Esther made sure of her flowers and fruit.

"You will call for me in half an hour," said the latter, alighting at the gate in the privet hedge. "I dare say I shall be some time, and I can stay in the garden till you come."

As she entered the walk she saw the backs of the two women at their promenade; and at the foot of the garden a man was at work, with two children watching him. She took the side-walk towards the latter, as in all probability the man was Mr. Wiggett himself.

She was soon at his side, and ascertaining that he was the gardener, she stated her name and errand; and as he raised a very puzzled red face from his work, and began to speak in a very hesitating manner, she mentioned that Mrs. Moss had sent her, and hoped that she had been right in doing so.

"Oh, certainly, certainly—that is——" and he stared, and grew as red as a peony, till Esther thought she had never seen so strange a man.

She turned to the children, till this curiously shy man should recover himself, which he seemed to do as he watched the retreating figures of the two women. At first they, too, were shy; but her beauty and her winning smile conquered little Mary, who soon gave her her hand in token of friendship.

Might she see the garden, as she had to wait for the carriage and her mamma? Esther was sure her little friend would show her the way.

The permission came from the owner of the garden with the same uncertainty of speech, and the same decided deepening of hue. Esther was glad Constance was not with her, for she would never have been able to keep her gravity. However, he led the way—not towards the house, but towards another square, walled round with privet. Within this there was nothing but strawberry-beds and

roses ; but such strawberries, and such roses ! Mr. Wiggett came to himself more thoroughly in giving Esther the names of his aristocratic favourites ; came to himself so far as to ask her the common question, " Are you fond of flowers ? "

But he did not get quite the common answer, with its more or less of real or feigned enthusiasm.

" I don't know," she answered, " that is, if I am fond of them as I know some are. I would rather have the green grass and the shadows of trees, without a single blossom, than these great bands of red, and yellow, and blue, like the lines on a target. I love the daffodils, that come up at the foot of the meadow—' a host of golden daffodils ' " (and her face glowed with real enthusiasm), " and I like to discover a bed of violets, a knot of prim-roses in the woods."

It was rank heresy to Mr. Wiggett. He looked upon flowers as the creations of gardening genius, and he considered all those common things, that grew of themselves, as no better than weeds. Nevertheless, he proceeded to gather a few of his finest specimens for Esther, enlarging, as he did so, on the merits of each.

" This dazzling creature would go far to make any one a lover of cultured beauty," said Esther, as he added a glorious white rose to those she held already in her hand.

Just then she looked down at the little girl, who was following silently. Her eyes were fixed on the flowers with a wistful expression, and at the last gift she had clasped her little hands together, as if she could worship it. She had been sated with fruit, but the good gardener had not thought of offering her a flower, and the craving for the beautiful thing went out of the child's eyes.

" I should so like to offer her one, to let her take her choice, if you will not think me rude to dispose of your gifts," said Esther, noticing the look, and having already

ascertained that she was not his own child, but a little stranger from the city.

Mr. Wiggett assented cheerfully, and Esther offered the little girl her choice from the cluster of roses she carried in her hand. Trembling with eagerness, the child pointed to the newly-gathered white rose, which Esther gave her, first picking off a great thorn, lest it should wound the little hand. The pretty mouth was held up to the giver with a kiss of grateful thanks.

"You little darling," said Esther, returning the kiss; "what is your name!"

"Polly," replied the child, in the sweetest lisping voice.

"What more?" said Esther.

"Polly Potter." Then she smiled shyly, and said, with her pretty lisp, "Whath yourth?"

"Esther."

"Ethter; what elth?" said Polly, with a gleam of childish humour.

But Mr. Wiggett just then rose from stooping among the strawberries, his face redder than ever, and a huge berry in his hand, crying—

"There, Polly, run to your mother, and take her this."

He dropped it into the little open palm, which it quite covered, and the child trotted off, looking back once or twice as she carried her treasures.

Mr. Wiggett was very happy to escort Esther to the gate, where Mrs. West was now waiting. As he did so he looked up the path, down which his wife and Mary Potter were again advancing, after having been round all the rest of the garden. Little Mary was walking by her mother's side, holding her rose to her bosom, and shielding it with one little hand, as one shields from the draught a lighted candle, and repeating to herself the word "Esther." She had a curious habit of stringing any simple word that pleased

her to a tune picked up from one of the numerous street-musicians that infest the district bordering on Belgravia. But just then nobody was paying any attention to Polly.

Mrs. West, seated in her pony carriage at the garden gate, in the shadow of the trees that rose on each side of it, looked up the broad, sunny path for Esther's coming, and saw, as in a picture, the two women and the little girl. By instinct she turned away her head, but she had seen enough to make her heart beat faint. It was some little time before she remembered (for she did not trust herself to look again) the face of the other and smaller woman; it was the tall figure that arrested her, and in an instant flashed upon her brain by the keen sunlight in which it stood, had photographed itself there. It was Mary Potter.

The unhappy lady sank back in her carriage in a cowering attitude. In that moment all power of action seemed to desert her, and she felt like one awaiting some inevitable blow. She could not rouse herself, even when Esther came and took her place beside her; till, looking in her face, and seeing the fixed and drawn expression which it wore in pain, the girl took her hand, and whispered, "You are ill, mamma."

Mrs. West gave a gesture of assent, and whispered, "Home."

"Drive home," Esther repeated, still holding her mother's hand, a look of deep anxiety gathering in her face.

At the same time, Mr. Wiggett, turning his back upon them, began to wipe his forehead with his brown silk handkerchief, and to consider a very hard question "Something will happen if she's not told," he said to himself. "It's the awkwardest piece o' work that ever fell to my lot; but she must be told this very night,"—a resolve which he took an opportunity of quietly communicating to his wife in the course of the afternoon.



## CHAPTER VIII.

### A RESPITE.

**M**R. WIGGETT held that meals ought never to be spoiled with unpleasant talk—and a very good rule it is; but after supper he drew his chair back to the table, to begin in business-like fashion. Mary had taken a seat in the window, and was looking out into the garden, as if she could not get enough of looking. She started at Mr. Wiggett's voice saying, "We've som'at to tell you, Mary; but you must not be put out." Honest Timothy's tone was too tragic.

She started, and rose to her feet. "It's about Esther," she cried; "is she dead?"

"No, that she aint," said Mr. Wiggett; "she's alive, and well, and as handsome a lady as you'd wish to set eyes on. It was she who kissed Polly, and gave her the rose to-day."

"Why was I not told?" cried Mary, bitterly.

"It was done for the best, both for you and the girl," said Timothy. "She hasn't a notion of the truth. It would be a pity to give her a shock like."

"To find out that her mother's a poor woman, instead of a rich lady," cried Mary, still more bitterly.

"There, there!" said Timothy, alarmed at the agitation in Mary's face and manner; "I wouldn't have told you if I'd thought you'd take on so. I'll say no more." A threat at which Mary calmed herself, and begged to be told

all that he knew, which, after all, was not much to satisfy the cravings of the mother's heart. He took it upon himself, however, to pronounce Esther perfectly happy.

"Well, it's better for her, perhaps, as it is, though I had rather she had shared with the rest."

"Of course it's better for her," said Mrs. Wiggett, sharply, "and she'll none thank you if you spoil her fortune by interfering now."

It might be so. Mary acknowledged it by a despairing silence. Esther, her own Esther, might not be thankful to know her true mother, but the reverse. "I must see her!" she exclaimed, at length.

Both her hearers assented soothingly. It was but right and natural that she should.

"I could see her at the church to-morrow, could I not?" said Mary, "without—without letting her know?"

"They don't sit in Hurst Church," replied Mrs. Wiggett, "or else I would have found this out before now; and I've only known it a week. They go over to Thornford, I dare say."

"I'll take you over there to-morrow morning on the chance," said Timothy; "it's the only other church within some miles;" and then he launched out in praise of Esther's good looks, thinking to comfort poor Mary; but she was not to be comforted thus, for she only longed all the more for the true comfort of again calling Esther her own.

The sight of the woman she had wronged seemed to have deprived Mrs. West of all her power to think or act, and to have paralysed her mind as a fatality paralysis. The time had gone by when flight would have presented itself as an alternative. But it was open to her to confide in Esther, and so disarm the future of its fear. And this might seem a very easy alternative. Once it would have seemed so to her, before all that her act entailed had become



apparent to her. But it did not seem so now. The aspect of the great error of her life seemed so much darker and more dreadful now, viewed in the light of all the deceit it had entailed, and of all the suffering it was sure to entail, that she shrank from revealing it; preferring to await the approaching fate that might crush her: for it seemed to her that it would pull down the whole fabric of her darling's life. Oh! if the fate would but tarry till her happiness was in the keeping of a husband whom she loved. How gladly would she see the love she had coveted pass away from her!

But when Esther had gone away to Thornford Church, which was at some little distance, a sudden resolution seized on Mrs. West, and that resolution was to go forth and meet Mary Potter face to face. For this purpose she thought it best to go to church in Hurst village, whither the Wiggetts would in all probability take their guest.

Thornford was one of the smallest of churches; a single aisle, with four plain pointed windows on one side, and three on the other; a door occupying the place of the fourth on that side. The pulpit and reading-desk were between the four windows; and the pews, facing one another, met there, leaving space for a small chancel. It was a very homely church, and the preacher's voice in it had a homely sound. Mrs. Potter was there early; and how glad she was that she had taken Polly with her! The presence of her children always calmed and strengthened Mary. Many a time the babe at her breast had seemed to hush all trouble and discord there. It was with a vague feeling that she needed this strengthening influence that she had taken with her the unconscious little maiden. As the bell ceased clanging overhead, and no Mrs. West appeared—for to her presence Mary was trusting for the identification of her daughter—Polly pulled down her mother's head towards

her, and whispered, "Thereth the pretty lady who gave me the roth."

"Where?" whispered her mother in reply.

Polly unceremoniously pointed with her small finger to a young lady who had entered an opposite pew alone, and who, raising her head at the moment, smiled, for an instant, a grave half-warning smile to the little girl.

Often during the service Polly looked at her friend, copying unconsciously her movements. But if the child looked often, the woman at her side scarcely ever lifted her sad eyes from Esther's face. Happily the latter was too earnest in her attention to the service to notice this.

When at length the congregation was dismissed, and streamed out through the porch into the grassy churchyard, sleeping in the white noonday light, Esther looked round for little Polly, but neither she nor her mother were to be seen. While the people were engaged in their closing act of worship, Mary Potter had stolen out, gone round the end of the church, and seated herself upon a flat tombstone, holding Polly's hand, and making the child stand hushed with awe in the presence of that strife of the spirit which was visible in her white face and crushed attitude. The desire had come upon her to disregard all consideration of her child's happiness, or her husband's wishes, whatever they might be, and disclose herself to Esther. She had anticipated the latter's speaking to the child, however, and knew that she was unequal to bearing it in silence, and therefore she had passed out quickly beyond the reach of an overmastering temptation. She did not rise till all were out of sight and hearing, and the temptation had passed away.

And while Mary was at Thornford, Mrs. West was looking for her in vain, scanning every face in the somewhat larger and less picturesque church of Hurst with trembling eagerness. She was leaving it with the rest of the con-

gregation, when there flashed upon her the face, not of Mary Potter, but of Sarah Wiggett—known to her only as Sarah Brown—who had worked for her on more than one occasion. Whence were these faces rising out of the past to accuse her? What had brought them together here?

Sarah was alone, Mr. Wiggett having gone home to act as dry nurse to Master Johnny, after having conveyed Johnny's mother to Thornford. On the impulse of the moment Mrs. West went up to her.

"I see you remember me, Mrs. Brown," she said, softly.

"Beg your pardon, Mrs. West," said Sally in her hardest tone, "Brown aint my name now."

The words were accompanied by a look of what seemed such dire offence, that poor Mrs. West blundered into the idea that she had renounced her husband's name, and was angry at the bare mention of it.

"I am sorry to have hurt you, Sarah," said the gentle lady (she had once been very kind to the forsaken little woman), "but I do not remember your name."

"I don't know that you ever heard it," Sarah made answer, stepping on, followed by Mrs. West, whose pony carriage was waiting. "My name's Wiggett, if you please—Mrs. Wiggett."

"Your husband died in Australia, then? I hoped that he might live to make amends for the wrong he did you. He expressed his regret to Mr. West's brother, when they met, but that is years ago. If you never heard from him, you may be glad to hear that he was sorry," she went on, in her eagerness to pour balm into an old wound, which perhaps she had opened. "My nephew is coming home in a few weeks, and he may be able to tell you something about him."

"I don't want to hear anything about him," said Sarah, defiantly. "I hope he got his deserts, that's all."

To Mrs. West's gentle nature, Sarah's feelings were

simply incomprehensible ; but she thought, in her humility, that it was because she had done wrong that it seemed to her so easy to forgive. Sarah was now walking far beyond her companion's pace, who had signed for her carriage to follow her, as she passed a little way up the road that led through the village, by Mrs. Wiggett's side.

"Is Mary Potter living with you?" she took courage at length to ask.

"Yes," was the ungracious answer, given with a look of fierce contempt.

"Would you take a message to her from me?"

"I'd rather not," she replied. "Mary Potter knows where you are, and that's enough."

There was nothing more to be said, and thus repulsed, Mrs. West fell back upon her carriage. Her feeble effort to avert the inevitable had failed—she would make no other. When she reached home, she had still some time to wait until Esther arrived. With her ineffable freshness and brightness she burst in upon the weary, fading woman like a breath of spring. Every little out-door incident was something to bring to her mother. Esther had told her all about Polly Potter in the garden, and now she told her how she had been pointed out by the little thing to her mother, and how both had disappeared at the close of the service—Esther supposed into one of the cottages which stood close by the church.

A sense of infinite relief came to Mrs. West as Esther proceeded—a sense of deep gratitude and thankfulness that she—that Esther—had been spared the sudden revelation. Mary Potter, it seemed, had no desire to claim her child ; she had but gratified her natural wish to see her, and had been content to go away as a stranger. It almost seemed to justify Mrs. West in having taken possession of her, since she valued so highly the treasure of which another could think so lightly.



## CHAPTER IX.

### AN UNEXPECTED GUEST.

**M**ONDAY, which ushered in the month of July, was the very ideal of what a July day should be; and therefore what, as a matter of fact, it very rarely is—warm, bright, and still; the very core and heart of glowing summer. It was too still and bright and cloudless for active out-door enjoyment; fitter indeed for

“Soft slumberings in the open eye of heaven,  
And all the listless joy of summer shades.”

Esther liked better the soft grey days when the skies are like dove-wings, only radiant for short moments, but infinitely tender in their light and shade. The expedition had been planned, as far as direction and means of conveyance were concerned, but the place where the party were to lunch had been left undecided, to see how the day turned out. If it had been windy, there was a little wood at the foot of the range of low hills which they were to visit, whose shelter would then have been acceptable; but on such a day as this it was unanimously voted that the fresher heights should be selected. Accordingly “The Barrow” was chosen, and the party proceeded thither in a couple of pony-carriages—Mrs. West’s and Mr. Vaughan’s—while Esther rode, now by the side of the one, now by the other. A light cart brought up the rear, with the servants and provisions.

“The Barrow,” unlike the other hills, or rather heights,

in the neighbourhood, was quite smooth and grassy; equally smooth and equally elevated on all sides. In shape it was like an ancient burial-mound, to which it doubtless owed its name, though its size precluded the idea of its having been formed by any power less mighty than that of Nature. On the level top of this height stood three magnificent lime trees, perfect in form, and foliage, and bloom. They were planted in a straight line at regular intervals, and though this form of arrangement was the least picturesque possible, it attracted the attention more to the individual tree, each a fountain of glory in itself. This arrangement had also the advantage of allowing the spectator to rest under the shadow of the central tree, and contemplate either of the others; and from whatever quarter the breeze might blow, wafts and clouds and streams of perfume were tossed toward that central tree; so that to sit in its shade, with a rich English landscape spread out below in smiling nearness, made a rare combination of natural delights to any one susceptible to these.

They reached the height in twos and threes, Mr. Vaughan taking Mrs. West, Esther following with Kate and Constance. Milly and Mr. Walton had somehow found the ascent longer and more difficult than the others. The servants carried up the repast, which everybody helped to spread under the central tree dangling over their heads its thick-hung tassels of golden blossom.

They had finished lunch, and were chatting gaily round the tree, when Constance, who had gone to the edge of the ridge to call the servants, came back rather hastily, crying, "There is somebody coming up."

"Well, what of that?" said Kate.

"I don't know who it can be," returned Constance.

"Very likely," said Kate; "but you need not be excited about it."

"But he beckoned to me," persisted Constance, evidently puzzling herself, while the others laughed.

There he was, however, to speak for himself; and none of them knew him; and yet there he was beckoning to them all.

"He has taken us for some other party," said Milly.

As he came nearer they could see that he was young and handsome, and well dressed; that is to say, he was dressed in the garb of the upper ten thousand: for he was far too gay for good taste, though his suit of fine blue, and his still brighter blue satin necktie, suited his fair complexion and blue eyes, and the yellow gold of his thick watchguard and pin matched his golden beard. There was a buoyance and brightness about the figure which pleased in spite of one's self. It was specially in harmony with that blue-skied sunny day.

Now that he was close at hand they all stared with wonder. Constance had sunk on the grass; Esther, in her riding-habit, leant against the tree, close to where her mother sat. The stranger must see the whole group, and yet he was still making signs of recognition. Esther had only time to bend over Mrs. West, and whisper, "Can it be Harry?" when he burst upon them with a merry laugh and breathless words of greeting.

"I've had such trouble to find you!" he cried, hurrying up to Mrs. West, and addressing himself to her. "The servants at the house told me that you were out for the day, so there was nothing for it but to follow; and then I found another set at the foot of the hill, discussing some very good ale—for I had some of it; and here I am. Well, aunt, you are not a bit changed; I should have known you anywhere."

He kissed her, but did not notice how faint and trembling she was, as she rose and leaned for support on Esther.



"I should have known you anywhere." Digitized by Google





Her he favoured with a look which embarrassed her. In any one else she would have called it a stare, and thrown it back from her sweet, proud eyes. But he shook hands with her kindly and warmly enough.

The Vaughans had delicately managed to withdraw themselves a little on one pretext or another ; but Harry had no sooner greeted Esther, than he said, in a loud whisper, " You had better introduce me at once, hadn't you ? and perhaps you'll give me something to eat." This last he said aloud, adding, " I'm not in the least particular ; I've lived on damper many a day."

The ceremony of introduction was duly performed, and Mr. Harry sat down to lunch alone, not a whit disconcerted by the fact that he was hungry—having travelled since early morning—and that he was about to make his hunger apparent by a hearty meal in the presence of a bevy of ladies ; all of which would have disconcerted most men. But Harry was perfectly natural and perfectly unconstrained. Somehow, it was Kate who served him ; Constance, who had been the principal waitress on the party, having retired in favour of her elder sister.

As for Esther, she kept close to her mother, who she felt was in need of her sympathy, even before the latter had detained her by a clasp of her trembling hand. And Harry rattled on to Kate and the company in general. He had fixed on his journey to England ; and after he had done so, he could not rest till he had accomplished it—he never could rest till he had accomplished anything he had set his mind on ; proof of a noble perseverance, thought Kate ; proof, perchance, of something very different, thought another and keener observer. Then he made light of the perils and tedium of his voyage ; made light of it altogether, as if he had crossed the Channel, instead of half the globe : in short, gave his audience enough to do to observe him. They

could not as yet understand him. That is difficult to do in the case of any human being, especially difficult where the character is either very deep or very shallow; and Harry West might be either—about his cleverness there was no manner of doubt.

Esther West was in that unenviable state of mind in which she felt that she ought to be happy, and yet knew very well she was not. Here was her cousin Harry, radiant with health and good-humour, come back before he was expected, and thus saving a world of anxiety about him. She had looked forward to his coming with such keen, shy pleasure: now that he had come, why was it that she could not rejoice? Why was it that a vague sense of disappointment fell upon her spirit, and made the brightness of the day seem so unreal, so like a painted show?

And in her own gentle and sensitive way Mrs. West was experiencing the same feeling. It was this that had made her seize Esther's hand, as she stood leaning beside her, slackly holding up the drooping folds of her riding-skirt. Mrs. West had made up her mind that very day to unburden her mind to Mr. Vaughan. She had intended to detain him while the young people were wandering about in the wood, and confide to him the history of Esther's parentage. A better confessor and adviser she could hardly have had—one whose large and generous sympathy could penetrate the subtlest motives, and whose charity never failed him when he had done so. This intention was, however, wholly frustrated. Mr. Harry West greatly preferred to sit there under the blossomed tree, and talk to whoever would listen.

After listening a while, Milly and Mr. Walton strayed away, and Constance prevailed on Esther to follow their example. The others remained; Harry actually detaining Mr. Vaughan and Kate.

At length a prolonged, and far from unmusical, call echoed

through the little wood. Mrs. West had declared that it was time to go home, as she expected a large party to dinner, whereupon Harry, on the alert at once, had sprung up to recall the wanderers by the far-reaching cry used by the shepherds ranging the Australian bush. Mr. Vaughan meantime escorted Mrs. West down the hill to her carriage, while she timidly begged that he would come over and talk to her some day. "It is about Esther," she said; and he promised, without so much as thinking that the request was an unusual one, or urged with unusual earnestness. "She is far from strong," he thought to himself; "I should not wonder if Esther were an orphan soon."

Meantime, the little wood was made to ring on every side with the efforts of the others to imitate the Australian call. Harry's hearty boyish enjoyment was infectious, and they all proceeded homeward, as happy a party of young people as were to be found on that summer day. Even Esther wondered that she had felt so strangely sad under the scented tree.





## CHAPTER X.

### LIKES AND DISLIKES.

**T**HE dinner-party in the evening was like most country dinner-parties—a very serious matter. Strong as the youthful element was, it was repressed by a mass of middle-aged dulness. Not that the young people were by any means discontented with the good heavy couples in between whom they were wedged. As a rule, it is the dull who object to the dull, not the brilliant and clever, and the fear with which the former regard the latter is wholly unfounded. Mr. Vaughan did not shine in society, and Mr. Walton kept all his shining for Milly that evening. So the dinner was unusually quiet; but then, everybody knew his or her neighbours, and it was all very pleasant. Only Harry West was irrepressible, and he gained golden opinions from all, by the way in which he relieved them of the awful responsibility of being lively.

“He is so clever, and so interesting,” said Kate, confiding to her sisters, in the hour devoted to combing and confidences, her impressions of the Australian. “What a delightful addition he will be to our croquet-parties! He is quite ignorant of the game, and he says we must teach him.”

“Do you like him, Milly?” said Constance, making a wry face behind her sister’s back.

“I really don’t know; he seemed very good-natured.”

"It's no use asking Milly," said Kate, with a little laugh, and tossing back her splendid hair.

"Well, I will tell you what I think," said Constance. "I don't like him at all, and I can see papa doesn't, though he won't say so. He is exactly like a handsome tortoiseshell cat; he always makes himself quite comfortable, and then he arches his back, and comes so near when he talks, and keeps purring in your ear. I expected to see him curl himself up on the drawing-room floor at somebody's feet."

Milly was laughing heartily while the merry Constance pursued her simile; but Kate broke in, indignantly, "Really, Constance, you grow quite ill-natured in your remarks."

"I do so hope," went on the offender, taking no notice of the rebuke, "that Esther will not marry him, though I dare say he has come over for the purpose."

Harry West, left alone in the drawing-room with Mrs. West and Esther, was in like manner talking over the Vaughans. He had heard their names, but was not sure if he had affixed them properly. "Connie is the plain one?" he asked.

"I suppose some people would call her plain," said Esther. "I think she is the most beautiful of the three; her face is so full of spirit and intellect."

"And Milly is the delicate one?" he said, going on with his inventory.

"She is not delicate," said Esther, smiling, "in the sense of having ill health. Her health is as perfect as mine."

"Ah! well, I don't like delicate women," he remarked; and Esther looked at him with a severe look in her large grey eyes, which then fell slowly off from him to her mother. But the gentle woman had not noticed. Her thoughts were not for herself, and she had not applied the remark. But Esther, unwilling further to discuss her friends, said gravely, "The Vaughans are very superior girls, and very highly cultivated; and we love them very much indeed."

"I love cultivated women," said her irrepressible cousin.

Esther could not help thinking that he spoke of these productions very much as if they were peaches, or something nice to eat. He seemed bent on giving them a perfect list of his likings and dislikings. And Esther was sometimes verging on an active dislike, as far as her large and tolerant nature would allow her. But the next moment she found it impossible to be angry; he was so candid, so good-humoured, so easily pleased. "He is like a boy still," she thought to herself, "with all a boy's faults, and a boy's good qualities. Perhaps living in that young community had something to do with it." It was a new and strange manner, and therefore struck her as unpleasant, accustomed to a different type; but childlikeness is not childishness, and a nature so open and sunny deserved at least a kinswoman's affectionate regard.

Such reflections passed through her mind as she listened to his ceaseless talk. At length, seeing her mother look utterly weary, she said good-night, and set the example of retiring to rest. But Harry was one of those people who labour under the impossibility of understanding a hint, however conveyed; and he still went on talking, and would go on, thought Mrs. West, till he was positively sent off to bed. But she was congratulating herself on the opportunity thus offered—an opportunity which she would otherwise have had to seek, of speaking to him alone. Now that she was alive to the difficulties of her position with regard to Esther, she saw fresh ones on every side. Harry doubtless knew the whole story, and might blurt it out to Esther unprepared.

She took advantage of a pause in his narrative of the voyage home, to lay her hand upon his arm, and ask him to sit down beside her: it was a fashion of his to stand, or rather hover, over any one he was speaking to. "You know all about Esther, Harry, I think?" she said.

"All! What?"

"That—that she is not my own child. My own little one died, you know."

"Oh! but it's all the same now, I fancy."

"She is as dear to me as any daughter, if you mean that, Harry; but I don't want her to be told that she is not my own, not now, not suddenly."

"Doesn't she know all this time?"

"I have never spoken of it."

"But she must know, surely?"

"No; I think not—I am sure not."

The Australian almost whistled; but he added, "I don't know that it matters much; only these things are awkward. I never would have thought of it if you hadn't spoken; but I'm sure to have it in my mind now, and then I may speak it out before I remember that I'm to hold my tongue. I never could keep confidences. If any one told me he was going to confide in me, I always said—Don't." And Harry laughed a careless laugh, to which his aunt responded with a heavy sigh.

"What do you think of Esther?" she asked, timidly, after a pause.

"She's about the finest girl I've seen yet; but then I haven't seen many, you know—not over half-a-dozen pretty women in the last dozen years, and none of them ladies. These Vaughans are all very pretty."

"Yes, but they are not like Esther. She is more beautiful and more admired than they are."

Harry's eyes had told him that Kate Vaughan was the most beautiful, and in his heart he had admired her most, with her colours of the morning—blue, and pink, and gold. Whatever glittered most was the first to attract Harry's notice; but he was one of those people who take the opinions of those about them, and are really influenced by them.



If, for instance, Esther was really the most admired, he was quite ready to admire her the most.

Mrs. West saw that she had made an impression, and was content. Parting from him, sending him off to bed rather, with another caution, she resolved, as speedily as possible, to put an end to the present state of things.

Esther was an early riser, and often spent two or three hours of the summer morning in reading out of doors before breakfast. But early as she was, Harry was up and out before her. He had already been all over the place—kitchen and stable included—chattering to the servants, just as he used to chat with the labourers and shepherds at home, with the sailors on the deck of the *Oriana*, homeward bound, with all and sundry, whoever they were, or wherever he might chance to meet them. No wonder that with many he was a favourite. He was quite unconscious in his universal friendliness. No man felt him to be his superior; he himself never felt himself the superior of any man.

And, as a rule, men liked him better than women did, perhaps because women are, as a rule, more exclusive than men. He had, however, one quality which women blindly admire—physical courage. Without a particle of imagination, he did not know the meaning of fear. He had leaped overboard after a boy, when the *Oriana* was steaming ten knots an hour through mid ocean, without a moment's hesitation, and had kept the lad afloat till both were picked up, shaking himself, when he got on deck, in the midst of the tragedy-stirred passengers, crowding with eager faces and beating hearts to witness the rescue, with as little concern as a dog who has fetched his master's stick. There were not many women, high or low, on board the *Oriana* who did not make a hero of him then and there, and enshrine him as such in their hearts for ever.



## CHAPTER XI.

### A MORNING ADVENTURE.

**N**OW, as Esther stepped out on the lawn, fresh as the morning, in her pretty cambric dress, with the light falling on her hair, and a little brown book in her hands—a favourite poet, neither Tennyson nor Browning—Harry, coming round the end of the house, welcomed her with delighted eagerness. It was pleasant to have a companion, when he had expected to spend an hour or two alone, and he was at no loss to express his pleasure. They went the round of the place, sauntering side by side.

“What a morning for a ride!” said Harry; “I must get me a horse at once.”

“Take mine,” said Esther. “It is just the morning I like for riding; the fresh breeze is so delightful.”

“And what will you do?” he replied, half tempted to go; for any kind of motion was delight to him. He was one of those people to whom rest is an impossibility.

“Stay here,” said Esther, smiling.

But Harry was unwilling to lose his companion, and so he said, “Can’t we have a walk instead?”

“Oh, yes,” she answered, readily—quite as ready as he was for active exertion.

They were walking up the green lane that led past Mr. Wiggett’s garden. All ways were as yet alike to Harry, and there was a little hill beyond, from whence they could look

over to "The Cedars." A wagonette was standing at the gate of the garden, and in the wagonette, clasping a great bouquet with both hands, stood little Polly Potter. A shy smile spread over the small white face, which three days' sunshine had not had power to tan, as she saw her friend approaching.

Esther stopped to speak to her; she had taken quite a fancy to the child. "Will you give me one of your flowers?" she asked.

"Yeth!" and the little maid held the bunch towards her.

Esther took it. "And which may I take?" she asked again.

"The pettieth," lisped the child, with her angelic smile.

Esther was disengaging a rosebud from the nosegay. A great heavy boy, who ought to have been holding the horse, was leaning on a post, looking at Esther. Coming down the path, and close upon them, was Mr. Wiggett, carrying Master Johnny, with Mary Potter walking by his side. A sickening feeling came over Mary, and she grasped Timothy Wiggett's disengaged arm, as she caught sight of the little group at the gate.

Just at that moment the mettlesome pony gave its head a shake, and with a loud snort started off at good speed down the lane and into the road. The mother gave a great cry, and came rushing to the gate. The heavy, sleepy-looking lad, after staring a full minute at the catastrophe, began a lumbering run; but Harry had darted off at full speed on the instant, and just as the start was about to become a race, had dexterously caught the dangling reins.

The child had fallen down in the bottom of the wagonette—thrown over by the sudden movement—and was lying there, half dead with fear. As soon as the boy came up, they lifted her out, and the terrified child clung round the neck of her deliverer.

Thus they came back to the garden-gate, the boy leading

the pony behind them. No one of the little group had moved or spoken after the cry from Mary. She leant, trembling, on one of the posts, white and speechless, till the horse was overtaken. Only when Harry had the child safe in his arms, Esther laid her hand softly on Mary's, and gave her a look full of tender, tearful, joyful sympathy, that said far more than any words.

Meantime, Harry came up with the little one, and held her out to her mother, who kissed her passionately, and burst into a fit of hysterical weeping.

Esther took the best way of soothing Mary. She held her in her arms in perfect silence, and in these moments of emotion the two who seemed so wide apart—the one sad, toil-worn, aging, and fading; the other blooming in health and youth; the one crushed with poverty, the other accustomed to riches and ease—drew close together, and loved each other with a love which might change the current of their lives. They might have met under other and calmer circumstances; and the natural tie between them would have asserted itself consciously; but it would not have caused their lives to flow in one, as this outburst of sudden sympathy had prepared them to do.

Then little Mary had to be caressed and made much of, and coaxed to re-enter the wagonette. She did not cry and scream against it; her protest consisted in the deadly white of her little frightened face, and the piteous look in her eyes, till both Mr. Wiggett and Esther pleaded that she might be left behind, in order to recover from her fear. But parting from her mother seemed only a greater evil to the child, and so she clung to her, and overcame her terror, and held up her pretty little mouth for farewell kisses all round. At last Harry and Esther were left looking after the wagonette as it bowled down the lane, having fairly started this time.

Mary Potter came back out of the pleasant, quiet country

to her small, dingy rooms, so full of children that Martin said, speaking of them as if they were rats, "the place was overrun with them."

She found Sarah, her substitute, full of grievances. Bob and Walter, two noisy schoolboys, had repudiated her authority, and openly set her at nought in the matter of coming in from their street-play at the appointed hour. Martin and Willie, two older ones, already out as apprentices, had grumbled at her cooking; but that was nothing to the trouble about Emily and Agnes, in which she had only participated as an on-looker; and she proceeded to pour into her mother's ear a tale of domestic disturbance, which made poor Mary's heart palpitate with dread.

Emily and Agnes were the twins, and they were both in one establishment, learning the joint and yet separate mysteries of dressmaking and millinery. They were tall and rather well-made girls, with something of their mother's grace, though failing to carry themselves as she had done, with her perfect health and elastic vigour.

On the Saturday of their mother's absence the twins had sat up very late—indeed, it is to be feared that they even trespassed on sacred hours—in order to finish the summer bonnets, which were to be worn for the first time on the following day. Mary had taught her children to go to church; and when the Sabbath bells began to ring, Agnes had come downstairs, Prayer-book in hand, with the new bonnet on her head, while Emily was tying on hers before the tiny looking-glass, preparatory to following her. Martin Potter was in the sitting-room, and in an exceptionally bad humour, even for him. He seldom took any notice of the girls, or what they had on—indeed, their taste was very good on the whole, and not at all flaunting; but the brilliant season, and fashion together, had tempted them to be gayer than usual, and Agnes's bonnet attracted her father's notice.

It was of white net, trimmed with blue, and with a blue flower fastened at the ear.

"Come here, and let me look at that thing you've got on your head," said Martin Potter, in a sarcastic tone; then, raising his voice, "Go upstairs and take it off; I won't have my girls dress like street-walkers so long as they are under my roof."

"And she didn't go at once," said Sarah; "and father roared like thunder, it set me all of a tremble, 'Take it off this minute!' and when Aggy took it off and held it in her hand, he went and crumpled it up, and flung it into the passage. And Aggy went upstairs crying, and Emily did not go to church either, and Aggy had a bad headache, and wouldn't eat any dinner; and Willie and Martin said it was a great shame," concluded Sarah.

And this was what Mary Potter came home to!





## CHAPTER XII.

### AN EVENING AT HOME.

**M**ARTIN POTTER'S home was scarcely an earthly paradise, and he was in a fair way towards making it something quite the reverse. A man may rule slaves, he cannot rule children, by mere force of will, unless, indeed, he can turn them into slaves, with all the slavish faults, born of fear and unwilling submission. He can only rule by the force of love that is in him: for love alone is just; and in the long run it is only to justice that men bow, or children either.

Mary's heart was once more in revolt against her husband. Before sitting down to her needlework—the necessity for which was never ending, still beginning—Mary took a look upstairs; she wanted to see the offending bonnet. In the bare, square room, with its scanty bed-furniture and single chair—the poor girls had to take everything by turns, down to basin and looking-glass. Things were constantly reproaching them for coming into the world double as they had done. In the room there was a cupboard; their Sunday frocks were hanging there; and on the little shelf, carefully pinned into a handkerchief, lay the new bonnet. Mary took it out and looked at it. It was certainly pretty, and at another time she would have been vexed at its brightness and gaiety; but the sympathy of the woman, at that moment, was roused for her girl; and when, a little







"The poor pale girl sat at her mother's feet."

further, pushed into a corner, but also wrapped up in a handkerchief, she came upon the crushed one—not even smoothed out from the rude grasp that had crushed it—Mary had to swallow a rising in her throat, and even put up her hand and hold it tight for the pain in it, before she laid the bonnet in its place, and came downstairs to sew.

Then, early in the afternoon, Emily came home, too ill to continue at her work in the close work-room; and Johnny had to be banished from the parlour, in which his fertile invention hourly discovered some means of creating a noise more fearful than the last. The poor pale girl sat down on a low stool at her mother's feet, and laid her aching head on the kind knees still as ready to bear her as ever; and Mary stroked her head, and at last persuaded her to go to bed, while little Polly hushed her songs, and gathered the rose-leaves, which had fallen from one of her overblown roses, and held them to her sister's head. She had discovered how grateful was their cool, tender touch, and said they were like her mother's fingers.

The boys came in from school, and were sent out to play; the elder ones tramped in to tea; Master John was sent off to bed—not without remonstrance on his part—so was little Mary; then the mother gathered her four boys for their evening lesson in writing and arithmetic. Thus the day wore on with its succession of tasks: at this last—and to Mary, pleasantest of the day's occupations—she was engaged when her husband came home.

“Shut up your books, boys,” she said at once; “we've done very well to-night;” and she smiled upon them, with the smile of a true mother, whose face will throw no shadow over her children's faces, because her own light of life is darkened.

The boys obeyed with alacrity. They were generally glad to make themselves scarce, as they expressed it, in

their father's presence. Besides, they had affairs of their own on hand upstairs; and saying good-night did not mean going to bed for them, as it did for the little ones. So they kissed their mother, and said good-night to their father, and were off; Mary whispering in the ear of the volatile Bob, who showed premonitory symptoms of the somersault he would certainly turn as soon as he got upstairs, "Mind, don't go to bed without saying your prayers."

There were no kind inquiries forthcoming, as to how Mary had enjoyed her visit, when husband and wife were left alone. She felt the omission keenly; she seemed to feel everything keenly to-night.

Martin Potter rose, and walked up and down the small apartment. He was a man who had a quarrel with the world; but he had also a far bitterer quarrel, and that was with himself. "I thought to rise in the world," he said, speaking aloud his gloomy reflections rather than addressing his wife, "and I'm sinking—sinking into the hopeless slough of poverty in which men are no more their own masters than so many cattle. I vowed that I would be independent, that I would call no man master to the end of my days, and all my efforts have failed. I've been offered work on another man's job to-day, and been forced to take it, too;" and he ground his teeth as he spoke. This was the secret of his moroseness.

Mary clasped her hands in her lap. "Oh, Martin! after all, we might be happy if you could but be contented."

"Contented!" he burst forth, with a sneer, "contented to live only to do another man's work, and be thrown off when I get useless, to die in a ditch; that ought to content a man, certainly;" and he laughed a savage laugh.

"It is the lot of millions," said Mary, "to work for daily bread. Let us do God's will, Martin, and trust in His providence."

He passed over her words. "What do the millions get by being content with such a lot?" he went on. "They sink, and sink, and sink. I've seen misery enough in this city to make a man mad at the very word content. I wonder that the wretches, crushed in the mire as they are, swept out of the way by whole cityfuls, don't rise and turn society upside down. In their place I would. I would live a man's life, or die a man's death—not a dog's!"

Martin Potter might have made a social reformer if his benevolence had been equal to his energy, but it was not.

Mary had covered her face with her hands. She had no lack of sympathy with her husband's side of the argument, one-sided as he was. Her woman's heart went over to him in his disappointment and humiliation, as she thought of him becoming another man's servant, after having been his own master for many years.

"I wish we could get away from here, and go back to the country," said Mary.

"Yes, I wish we could emigrate; but it's too late—I haven't enough to take the lot."

"Martin, take the boys, and I'll come after you with the girls as soon as I can."

It was a noble offer from the woman who made it, to whom such a parting would be torture. She rose and went towards him, and put one large, soft hand on each shoulder, and looked into his face with beaming eyes. "Go, and we will come together again with the love of the old days, when we came together at the first."

He softened, and she hesitated.

"And, Martin," she said at last, "I have seen Esther—our Esther."

He started away from her, his face lowered again, and he gave vent to one of those expletives which Mary disliked so much.

"Why didn't you tell me at once?" he said.

"I did not think you cared." Then she went over the events of her visit as far as Esther was concerned, and concluded by saying, "If you knew what a struggle I had to keep quiet, and her so near me, on the day when I saw her at church, and again this morning. And I am sure that young gentleman was her lover, who saved little Mary's life. It is best not to disturb her now. We can never be anything to her."

A few more questions concerning what she had heard of Mrs. West, and Martin Potter sank into silent thought for the rest of the evening. At ten o'clock Agnes came home, and ate her supper and went off to bed without saying good-night to her father, thereby showing that she was not reconciled to the destruction of her new bonnet.

There was no further attempt at a better understanding made between Martin and Mary that night. The wife's effort had been turned aside. The thing that seemed so easy was, indeed, as difficult—that turning of the heart—as the turning a stream out of the channel which it has made for itself in the course of ages.

Martin Potter said no more, either good or bad, but he looked more gloomy and bitter than ever—a gloom and bitterness which increased as days went on. Poor Mary, who was not in the secret of her husband's quarrel with himself, thought that it was against her that his black looks were levelled, and, conscious of her generous relents towards him, even at his worst, felt more deeply wounded than before.

The truth was, there had flashed on Martin's mind the thought that in this reappearance of Mrs. West there might be a loophole of release from the intolerable pressure of his circumstances. Mrs. West had done him an injury. He had never bargained that she should take away the child

out of the knowledge and reach of her parents. He had stipulated fairly for the very reverse, and therefore she had lost all right to Esther. But, whispered the evil genius of the man, she might be glad to re-purchase it. The suggestion came to him from within, and not from without, and yet it was one which he hated to entertain. This man could not bear to think meanly of himself. He had set out in life with a strong feeling of independence, and he had all the virtues of which independence is both the root and the fruit. He was self-denying, he was industrious, he had high self-respect, he had honourable ambition; but this honourable ambition had been defeated by circumstances. He had engaged in speculations for which he had not the necessary capital, and in order to carry them on he had been obliged to truckle to men who were really dishonest in their intentions.

His better nature told him that the suggestion, that he might profit by the reappearance of Esther, was an unworthy one. As far as he was concerned, he knew very well that he would not have objected to any Mrs. West who would have relieved him comfortably of some half-dozen or so of his progeny. At the same time he knew—as people know a thing in the innermost recesses of consciousness, which they will not allow themselves to think even—he knew that the suggestion flashed upon him would be irresistible, and therefore he chose to create a justification for the course he would pursue, by dwelling on the enormity of Mrs. West's offence towards him. She had taken out of his hands all power over his own child. That was the point he seized upon. It was the point he could feel. Of the real theft of which the unhappy lady had been guilty in the uncontrollable yearning of her unsatisfied maternity—the robbery of his child's love—he thought not at all. But strangely enough, it would seem, he contrived to make him-

self angry with Mary because she had shown herself willing to renounce Esther at last. "Women never feel anything long enough," he thought, "to make it worth while to consider their feelings." In reality he wanted the additional justification of his wife's long-cherished desire to possess the love of her first-born.

Having worked himself up to the necessary pitch of resentment, he resolved to see Mrs. West, to claim his daughter, and to threaten the child-stealer with legal proceedings.





## CHAPTER XIII.

### THE TRUTH COMES OUT.

**H**ARRY had got his horse—he seldom lost any time in getting anything he wanted—and he and Esther were out riding together when Mr. Vaughan paid his appointed visit to Mrs. West. In that long visit the poor lady poured her sad story into the sympathising ear of her friend and neighbour, and he, as he listened, grew more and more grave and anxious. The lines of his sensitive face quivered with emotion as she concluded her tale, in which she suppressed nothing, excused nothing, but narrated every step with the severest candour.

“I see by your face,” she said, humbly, “how greatly you think me to blame. When I look on it in this light myself, it seems terrible to me; stripped of all the false glosses I put upon it, it is terrible! I robbed another of the love God had denied me. You cannot sympathise with the temptation, and how easily I hid from myself the enormity of the wrong I was doing.”

“I can sympathise with you only too well,” he said, gently, and in a voice as full of humility as her own.

“What shall I do?” she asked, reassured by the tone more than the words even.

“I think you ought to let her know as soon as possible,” he replied, speaking of Esther; “the knowledge might reach her from some other quarter, and pain her far more



than if you revealed it to her. If I understand her rightly, she has one of those rare natures at once strong and tender."

"It is so hard for her," murmured Mrs. West: "it will shake her trust in everything."

"Yes, it is very hard for her," he answered: "we can hardly do wrong and suffer for it alone. If we could, our sorrow, being selfish, would never have the divine power it has of overcoming our sin."

Mrs. West listened, and was soothed by that profoundly sympathetic voice. She was taken by surprise, too; for though Mr. Vaughan went through the usual routine of religious observance, no one round him knew that he was what would be called a religious man. She had never heard him speak in this manner; but she was very glad that she had spoken to him now, and she expressed her gladness before returning to the topic which absorbed her.

"And I shall be most happy if I can be of any further use to you. Ah!" he said, as if suddenly moved to speak out his own secret trouble, "you can make amends for this wrong perhaps. You can restore, at need, what you have taken away; the terrible sorrow is, when we sin against love, and can make no amends, because death has shut us out from making it, or may be something stronger than death."

He stopped, and Mrs. West looked inquiringly. Was it possible that she might help him as he was helping her? We know so little of one another—so little of our nearest neighbours, our dearest friends.

He seemed to answer the look. "Yes," he said, "I am speaking from sad experience. I acted selfishly—basely, it seems to me now; then it seemed the reverse of selfishness. I married my wife against her will—she was too gentle and yielding to resist the pressure of other minds, and I thought my devoted love would make amends to her

for an unhappy attachment. It was not so ; and when she left me with her motherless girls, I vowed that I would never impose my will on any human being again. I, too, took what was not my own, but had been given to another."

They parted before the return of the young people, not before Mrs. West had also confided to her friend the hope that the cousins might love each other. "As Harry's wife she would be nearer to me," she said, "and then he is the heir of all I possess."

Mrs. West set herself to her task at once. That very evening she found, or made, an opportunity to talk with Esther alone. But her first effort was an entire failure. The weakness of her over-sensitive heart was complicated with physical weakness to such an extent, that her frail body was ready to sink with the trial. After detaining Esther by her side in the twilight, and making more than one vain attempt to find her voice, she did manage to say, in a whisper which startled the girl, "I have something to tell you, darling ; something which I ought to have told you long ago."

"What is it, mamma ?" said Esther, kneeling at her feet.

But the face looked up to, even in the uncertain light, was so agonised, that she sprang to her feet, and bending over it, held it to her breast, crying, "Oh, mamma ! what has hurt you so ? I am sure it is nothing of any consequence. You are too anxious, and you know you were told not to excite yourself."

"Esther—Esther ! I have wronged you so !"

"Mamma, you must be ill to say such a thing," replied the girl, passionately, forgetting in her pain her usual soothing tone. "No, I will not hear another word," as Mrs. West was sobbing out something more. And so the effort ended in a fit of faintness, which Esther knew how to soothe. It was one of her mother's attacks, that was all.

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"And I shall be most happy if I can be of use to you. Ah!" he said, as if suddenly made out his own secret trouble, "you can make amends wrong perhaps. You can restore, at need, what is taken away; the terrible sorrow is, when we have lost love, and can make no amends, because death comes out from making it, or may be something so near death."

He stopped, and Mrs. West looked inquiringly, wondering possible that she might help him as he was. "We know so little of one another—so little of our neighbours, our dearest friends."

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"Do not be ill to say such a thing!"  
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word, something more."  
"Which Esther!"  
"Of her attacks, that

It was, indeed, time that Esther knew the story of her parentage. The village of Hurst was already babbling it and cackling over it, and its human geese were beginning to stretch their necks and hiss in her direction. Mrs. Wiggett, for reasons of her own, had whispered it into another pair of ears greedy of gossip; and three sets of these appendages having thus heard the secret, it was, according to the old adage, no longer among the things which could be hidden. Within the half-hour, that third pair of ears, having a pair of legs belonging to them, and likewise a tongue, had made their way to that emporium of village news, Mrs. Moss's shop.

It is damping to the ardour of the secret-bearer to find that the important communication which she has to make, quite in confidence of course, has been anticipated, and the secret already in possession of another. The secret is no longer inviolable—in fact, it is felt to be no secret at all. The merest hint that another is informed, is enough to justify the keeper of a secret, who is bursting to reveal it, in breaking the seal upon her lips.

“Isn't that a dreadful story about Mrs. West?” said the gossip, with a look of mysterious horror; “but I dare say you've never heard on't.”

“I've known ever so long, Mrs. Pratt,” said Mrs. Moss, dolefully, but with conscious superiority; “but I've never mentioned it to no one.” As she said this she glanced at the pane, and perceived that her lord and master was absent in the meantime.

“To think,” continued Mrs. Pratt, now justified in giving Mrs. Moss a bit of her mind, which freedom almost compensated for the loss of the primary satisfaction of being first in the field, “to think that she should have stole away an honest lab'r in' man's child, and made out as she was her own.”

Mrs. Moss and Mrs. Pratt agreed that it would be impossible for Esther to hold up her head among gentlefolks any longer; for the wretched feeling of caste is not confined to the higher ranks—nay, there it often remains only as a natural barrier against inferior culture and ruder manners, while in the ranks beneath it flourishes in the most fantastic and repulsive forms.

And while the village babbled, the story spread into other and higher circles, and that without delay. The next morning the cook at Red Hurst had it from the butcher, and when her young mistress had given her the orders of the day she retailed it to her, with the startling addition that Mrs. West was in the hands of the police, and would most likely get penal servitude for life—a fact which her informant had only put as a probability, while his had only ventured to say it was no more than she deserved.

Kate burst in upon her father in his study with the astounding story, which she only half believed. She found him leaning his head on his hand, and he answered very sadly, "The main fact is true enough, my dear, but the rest is made up of malice and envy."

"Oh, papa! what shall we do?" cried Kate, to whom a fact was a simple fact, and nothing more. "Who could have thought that she would have turned out such an impostor?"

"Hush! my child. Judge not, that you be not judged."

Kate was turning away to seek her sisters at their morning avocations, when her father called her back.

"My dear," he said, "Esther has known nothing of this, and you must not allow yourself to feel the slightest difference towards her."

Another man might have said *show*. Mr. Vaughan laid a special emphasis on the word *feel*.

After lunch came callers, to find the sisters sitting on the

lawn, and not engaged, as usual, either in work or play; neither work nor play had been thought of that morning. Indeed, Connie had only been restrained from rushing off to "The Cedars" by her father's representation that even she might not be welcome just yet.

The callers were Mr. Carrington and his mother, old friends and also near neighbours of the Vaughans. Mrs. Carrington was the widow of a merchant, who had left her a large fortune under her own control, and their only son dependent on her will. Benjamin Carrington had been called to the bar, and was working at his profession as if he depended on it for daily bread. He worked for the sake of work—for the love of work which is born in men of active minds; and not only was he gaining ground in his profession, but becoming known as a political thinker and writer.

Nobody saw much of Mr. Carrington, not even his mother, though he was devoted to her; but the Vaughans saw more of him than any other people did. He was called in the household "Connie's friend." Connie had a great friendliness of character, but this friendship came of early association. She had been the little one, the wild-haired romp of eight, when he was coming to man's estate; and he being shy at that undeveloped period, the frank little girl had been a great resource and comfort to him when the others were growing into girls as shy as himself. Then Connie had never grown into a "regular young lady." When asked to explain himself, Mr. Benjamin had said, "Oh, a regular young lady is one who expects you to make a fool of yourself in some way or other." That was in his first period of cynicism. Now he had learned to talk to young ladies in West-end drawing-rooms about things which he supposed, with other sensible men, were interesting to them, though how they can be is more than one can

explain. But to Connie he could talk of the things which interested him—of the ideas and movements of the day, and so he was still called Connie's friend, without the slightest covert allusion to anything approaching to love-making.

Mrs. Carrington saw a great deal more of the Vaughans than her son did, and also of Esther West. The young ladies were a great resource to the old one, especially as she was one of those old people who like best the society of the young and lively. Her preference, however, was for Esther. She was a little woman herself, and Esther's grand air captivated her, and her unfailing sweetness had triumphed completely. She was always praising Esther to her son, and she had lately gone a little farther, and hinted that she would make a noble wife—a lady who could take her place by her husband's side, however high he rose; who could make herself the companion of cultivated men, the very wife for a man of high aims. Benjamin, however, made no sign; he was only friendlier than ever with Connie Vaughan.

It was, therefore, with an expression of real concern, almost amounting to agitation, that the old lady spoke of what she had just heard. Herself well born, and not at all sharing in the democratic notions of her son, though she had come to regard them as all very well for political purposes, Esther's plebeian birth, if the story was true, was a fatal blot.

"I have come to hear it contradicted," she said.

"But I cannot contradict it, Mrs. Carrington," said Kate. "It is quite true. Mrs. West herself told papa just before it came out."

"But what is your version of the story?" said Mr. Carrington, looking round, but resting his eyes on Constance.

"I have been to papa, and made him tell me," she broke



in, answering the glance. "Mrs. West adopted Esther when she was quite a baby, and took her way from her parents without letting them know; but they had really given her the child to keep."

"Come, that is not quite so bad as your story, mother. That was much more sensational!"

"It is bad enough," said Kate, "for Esther's relations have found her out, and will be coming after her. It is very hard on her."

"It's very awkward, to say the least," said Mr. Carrington.

"And a labourer's daughter, too; it is a shocking imposition," said Mrs. Carrington. "But I never liked that meek Mrs. West."

"There is quite a large family," continued Kate; "ten of them, I am told."

"How shocking!" cried Mrs. Carrington. "What do you think of it, Milly, my dear?"

Milly was sometimes mildly oracular; but at present she ventured no opinion on the main point, a mode of procedure which she sometimes adopted, and which made Constance rebel once so hotly that she had made the severe remark, that Milly's part in the affairs of this world was to do nothing but look good. "I shall be very sorry to lose Esther for a friend," said Milly.

"I don't see why we should lose her for a friend," said Constance, warmly. "This does not make any difference in her. *She* is the same, whether her father was a duke or a dustman. If she had been brought up in her father's home, I should never have known her, and perhaps she would have been different outwardly, so different that I could not have loved her as I do."

Constance had risen to the occasion, and looked quite eloquent, so eloquent that Mr. Carrington regarded her

with a kindling look, which was not lost upon his mother ; but he said, lightly, "That's right, Connie ; always stand up for your friends, especially when they are thrown into the shade."

"I suppose Esther will remain with Mrs. West," said the old lady. "After all, those people can be very little to her."

"Nothing at all," said Kate, to whom the idea of a labouring man for her father, and a family of ten brothers and sisters, such as she pictured to herself, was sufficiently repulsive.

"Oh, Kate ! her own father and mother and sisters and brothers nothing to her ! Esther will love them all, whatever they are."

"I should think it would be settled," said Milly, "by Esther marrying Mr. West."

At this Mr. Carrington started from his attitude of assumed carelessness ; but, immediately resuming it again, stood listening to the account Kate gave his mother of the Australian's return.





## CHAPTER XIV.

### FATHER AND DAUGHTER.

**M**ARTIN POTTER despised himself for the step he was about to take, but, nevertheless, on the next Saturday he presented himself at "The Cedars." Harry had gone to town to meet one of the companions of his voyage, and Esther had gone down to the village. Mrs. West was alone. Two days had passed, and yet she had not summoned resolution to tell her story, which was being freely discussed in her own kitchen, with much stormy assertion and scornful unbelief.

"Please, ma'am, there's a rough-looking man wants to speak to you. I've left him standing in the hall. He says his name is Martin Potter," said the serving-maid.

"Tell him to step in here," said Mrs. West, with a firmness and calmness which she could not have believed it possible that she could summon. Now that the inevitable had come, and must be met face to face, she was brave. It is the oncoming of fate that is terrible.

She rose to receive her visitor, uttering no word till the servant had closed the door, and meeting his eyes unflinchingly. He had been working himself into a passion for a week, but somehow he found it difficult to give vent to it in that frail presence: she looked so gentle and yet so dignified.

"You know who I am, I suppose?" he said, as harshly as he could.

"Yes, Martin Potter; and I know you come to accuse me of taking Esther from you. I have no excuse to offer, except my overwhelming love for the child."

She sat down, unable to stand, and beckoned to him to be seated; but he did not accept the invitation. She had taken the words out of his mouth, and he was more exasperated than ever. He was not a man who acknowledged superior presences; he was not aware that what he felt was the loss of self-respect. He knew that he had come there to extort money, and for no other purpose; and how was he to make that purpose known?

"I have come to claim my child," he said.

"Surely you will let me keep her still," she murmured, "if it is her choice to stay with me. If you only knew her, it would make amends to you for the wrong I have done. I have bestowed upon her every care; and," she hesitated, "she has been accustomed to every luxury. I shall never seek to hide her from you again, and, in the days to come, she may be a blessing to you, as she has been to me."

"I am not going to be humbugged with your fine words. I tell you I want the girl," he answered, sternly.

It never occurred to Mrs. West to say, How much will you take to go away, and never let me see your face again? which was what he wanted, though he would have hated her for saying it.

"Deal with me as hardly as you please," she said, "but spare her. She knows nothing."

"Then she ought to know; where is she now?" he spoke with white, raging lips.

"She is out," replied Mrs. West.

"I don't believe it," he said, rudely; "I will see her."

"She is out, I assure you. Come again, and you shall see her."

He was about to acquiesce in this arrangement, when Esther entered the room, her hat swinging on her arm.

Mrs. West covered her face with her hands, and groaned aloud. Esther looked from one to the other in amazement, and, of course, without in the least understanding the position. There stood, quite near her darling mother, a tall, powerful-looking man, in working clothes, with a threatening aspect—such a man as was not usually admitted to the drawing-room. Her first thought was, How did this man come here? Her first words were to give expression to the thought. "What is the matter, mamma? what is this man doing here?" and she advanced her hand upon the bell.

But instead of retreating, the man looked at her steadily from head to foot, and burst into a scornful laugh.

She had laid her hand on the bell, when that laugh startled her; and she returned his look, which seemed to her full of insult, with a haughty stare. A sudden resentment lowered on the man's face. "Don't touch that bell," he cried.

"Tell me what you want then," she said. "Do you not see that you are making her ill?"

He took no notice of her words. "You are Esther, are you not?"

"That is my name," she replied; "but if you do not leave the room this instant, I will ring the bell."

"Esther; my darling——" Mrs. West could say no more, she stretched out appealing hands towards both.

But the man burst forth, wrathfully, "Come near you! a nice lady you are. So I am not to come near my own daughter!" and he strode towards her, and grasped her wrist till she could have screamed with pain.

Mrs. West gave a suppressed cry of anguish. This was worse than anything she had dreaded. A terrible antagonism was in the looks of the two who stood there; and yet



**"So I am not to come near my own daughter."**



they were father and child, who ought to have met in love and reverence.

"Yes," went on Martin Potter, quite beside himself with fury, and grasping Esther's wrist still tighter, till her face grew white with pain, though she gave no other sign of it, "you are a fine lady, but I'll teach you manners yet. You shall come home with me at once."

An unaccountable feeling that the man was speaking truth of some kind fell upon Esther, and made her dumb. Once more she looked in the almost furious face beside her, and was somehow or other convinced.

"My father!" she ejaculated, with a look of horror, which the object of it marked with a sharp pang of quite justifiable passion, and the hand which had rested on the bell-handle fell powerless at her side. At the same time Martin Potter released her arm, and she sprang to Mrs. West's feet, crying, "Is this true, mamma? tell me, is this true? Oh, poor mamma!"

"It is true," said Mrs. West, through the tears that had come to her relief, "and I am not your mother, Esther; though God knows I could not have loved you more if I had been."

"But how is it? I cannot understand," she said, holding Mrs. West's trembling hands, and weeping with her, both quite forgetting the frowning presence before them.

"I had you when you were a little child, Esther, when my own babe was taken away from me, and I loved you so that I could not bear to part with you, or to think that any one had a better right to your love, and so I took you away, and hid you from those who had such a right, and might have claimed you."

"From this man!" thought Esther, bitterly; and naturally enough, the wrong did not appear to her a great one. She never thought of a mother in the case. She



could not, all at once, put another, who was quite unknown to her, in Mrs. West's place.

"I had you on condition that your parents were not to lose sight of you, and yet I took you away from them. If I did wrong, I have suffered for it. Oh, my child ! that I could suffer for it alone."

Martin Potter, though a man of savage temper, had not quite a heart of stone, and he would in all probability have relented, but for Esther's next movement.

Her face was hidden in Mrs. West's lap, and through the conflict of feelings that crowded upon her the pain of her wrist made itself felt, and her heart rose in revolt against the author of it. And yet it was not so much at the suffering to herself that she revolted, as at the cruelty which had inflicted it. She would have been more indignant, more revolted even, if the pain had been inflicted on some one else. Hatred of every form of cruelty was a passion with her, and had been from her childhood. She rose slowly, saying to herself, "I will defy this man;" and kissing Mrs. West on the forehead said, passionately, "You are my own mamma still, and I will never leave you."

"And I tell you that you must leave her and come with me !" thundered Martin Potter.

Then Mrs. West rose also, and braved his fury. "She shall stay if she chooses, Martin Potter. Use all your power against me ; you shall not touch her. I will call my servants if you draw a step nearer ;" and the frail lady placed herself between Esther and her father.

"I shall not touch you, woman," he said, scornfully. "Do you think I came here to do violence ? I came here to have my rights, and the law will give me them. I suppose stealing a man's child is a crime it will punish. Do you want to die in a prison ?"

He did not know anything of his legal rights in the case,

but then neither did his listeners. He had conjured up for both of them a new and deadly terror. He turned to Esther, who stood with quivering nostrils and dilated eyes. "Young woman," he said, "you had better come with me quietly. I did not come here to do you any harm, but I won't be despised and defied by my own girl."

"Can he send you to prison, mamma?" cried Esther, to whom the bare idea of exposure to the penalty was something worse than death.

"I think he might; I do not know," she answered, in a sinking voice.

"Mamma, it will kill you! I will go with him," rejoined Esther, moved by an impulse far nobler than defiance now, an impulse too noble to suffer the former even to exist by its side. She would save her benefactress by sacrificing herself. If her going away into poverty with him would satisfy this man—her father—she would go with him, that the power of the law, whatever it might be, might never be invoked against her whom she had loved as a mother. "I am ready," she said, turning to her father.

Martin Potter was more accustomed to obstinacy than to will. He was acquainted with the resolution, which was not to be moved at all by any argument, good, bad, or indifferent; but he knew nothing of that force which, as inexorable, is yet swayed by a breath of motive, and changes as swiftly as the well-poised balance when the weight is thrown into the scale. He regarded his daughter with astonishment, not unmingled with contempt.

But Mrs. West clasped her hands together, and poured forth entreaties that Esther might be allowed to stay with her. Martin Potter, however, now that he had been thwarted, and his passions had been fairly roused, was immovable; and Esther whispered to Mrs. West that it was better to let her go, without further effort.

Then the poor lady pleaded with the man bent on exercising his own hard will to the uttermost, for the respite of a single day, that Esther might prepare for her change of residence.

"No, she must go now, without any respite." He managed to take every word she uttered for a further insult. She had had enough respite from her true and proper place as the daughter of a working man.

"Let me send the carriage, and pack up some of her things, at least," she murmured.

"No, we can tramp," he said, with intentional roughness of voice and accent.

Esther had tied on her hat. She turned to him again quietly, almost respectfully. "Will you allow me a few minutes to say good-bye? I shall follow you almost immediately."

He frowned, but moved towards the door. Tears and entreaties would not have moved him; but he could not, for the sake of the small amount of self-esteem left to him, refuse a request so simple, and so simply asked. She opened the door for him, and closed it softly as he strode out into the hall, then in an instant she was back in the arms of her whom she still called mother.

Esther knew nothing of the law and its penalties, but she had an idea that her present act would save Mrs. West from future punishment, not only in averting her father's vengeance, but in condoning the offence. All she could do now was to comfort one who would not be comforted. Mrs. West's self-reproach was agonising. "Have I not had all those happy years?" said the girl, in answer to these self-upbraidings. "Think of all I should have lost; and remember, I will come back to you; sooner or later I will come back." And thus they parted, with mutual assurances of unfailing affection.

And Martin Potter, who had twice repassed the window of the drawing-room, crunching the gravel beneath his feet, as if to stamp down reptile thoughts that would cling to him, received his daughter in sullen silence. He had not bargained for such a result as this ; but he was determined to carry it with a high hand now, both with Esther and with Mrs. West. Side by side, father and daughter—the one with the gait and attire of a workman, the other with the mien of a lady—took their way across the common—two miles of dusty highway beyond it to be traversed before they reached the station ; while Harry West was hastening homeward, and a pleasant party were assembling on the sunny lawn at Redhurst, waiting for Esther to join them. Among them was Benjamin Carrington, determinedly idle for one afternoon at least, but, from his pre-occupied air, looking as if he had important business on hand.





## CHAPTER XV.

### THIRD CLASS.

**H**T needed a higher heart than may be at first supposed for Esther to accomplish that walk to the station without breaking down. Her courage was strong. She had youth, and health, and mental vigour wherewith to meet whatever lay before her; but it needed faith as well as courage to advance on an unknown path, and to feel her whole world of facts and ideas, her hold upon the past and her visible future, fall away from her in an hour. Happily, it is not given to youth to realise the extent of any earthly calamity, and it is given to its simple faith to be able to say, "I will fear no evil."

The village had its eyes on them, and its mind was immediately at work on the problem. Hurst was a wide-awake village; it had not the true bucolic mind, unfathomable and uncalculable in its density. It was near enough the great city to experience constant electric shocks of mental activity; therefore it made a very shrewd guess at the truth. Esther had been very friendly with the villagers. There was not a child in it who did not know her and expect her greeting, the older ones dropping their curtsseys, and the little ones expecting to be patted on the head or kissed if they happened to have clean enough faces. Now, as she passed up the one-sided street, she nodded to a little group standing at one of the cottage doors. In the front

was Ann Pratt, who stood and stared rudely, saying, quite loud enough for Esther to hear, "Mother said I needn't curtsy to her no more, for I'm just as good as she is." The words somehow drew Esther closer to her father. If only he had been something more lovable, she would have liked to stand by him in the face of all the world. She was getting sore of heart though, and the words hurt because they were meant to hurt.

A few steps further, and some one plucked at her skirt. It was a little girl of some four summers, a great pet of Esther's. Lucy Ashe was one of those sweet blossoms on the tree of life, which compensate the lover of his kind for many a bitter fruit. She held up her pretty face, saying, "Me div oo a tis," and Esther stooped and kissed her, and was greatly comforted. She was so absorbed by this little incident that she did not see Mr. Moss, driving his good lady before him like a recalcitrant cow, enter into his shop, and shut the door.

After the hot and dusty walk they came to the station, having only spoken once, when Esther pointed out a short cut through the last few fields. Happily, she was saved waiting at the station, and the probable encounter of inquisitive acquaintances. A train was due in a few minutes. Martin Potter walked up to the office and took the tickets, one of which he handed to Esther: it was third class. She took it without comment, scarcely noticing it, indeed; for as the distance between her and home increased, her heart became heavier and heavier, as a burden grows heavier the further it is borne.

"You haven't been used to travel third, I suppose," said Martin Potter to his daughter; "but what is good enough for me is good enough for you."

There was no time to reply, for just then the train came up, and she felt herself hustled into a carriage full of men,

women, and children. The man opposite to her had a pipe in his hand, and as soon as they were in motion again he began to puff away. She was next the window, however, and she kept her face as close to it as possible, to escape the—to her—sickening odour.

Near the next station the train slackened speed, and a down train shot by. She was looking out as it passed, and in the twinkling of an eye the face of Harry West flashed upon her and was gone. The gay, good-humoured, gilded youth, sitting smiling and at ease among his first-class cushions, went flashing past, and in upon her, the next instant, pressed the rough or squalid faces of the men and women sitting opposite to her in the crowded compartment. The shock of the contrast, in its grim reality, came upon her, and she turned deadly pale.

"If ye don't like my pipe, miss, just say the word, and I'll put it out," said her opposite neighbour. She smiled faintly, and said she did not think it would hurt her, though she did not like it; at which, with true courtesy, he proceeded to put out the pipe, and to deposit it in the pocket of his fustian jacket.

Harry West had flashed past in happy unconsciousness. He had not seen Esther as she was hurried on in the opposite direction, and he was loud in his lamentations when he heard what had taken place in his absence. Mrs. West, lying on the sofa in a state of utter prostration, from which the servants had guessed that there was something wrong, could not answer the half of his questions.

"If I had been here," he said, "she should not have gone away like that. I would have threatened the man as an impostor, or else have offered him money to go away."

Harry had great faith in the efficacy of the current coin of the realm. His next idea was to go after Esther, and

bring her back ; but this was impracticable, seeing that, in her agitation, Mrs. West had never asked Martin Potter for his address—a thing which he might not have granted.

“ And it would only exasperate him to follow him immediately, and he may visit his exasperation upon her. He is not a man to be trifled with,” said Mrs. West: “ and besides, he is her father.”

“ Oh, but we must have her back,” said Harry, boldly ; “ it will never do to let her be spirited away in this fashion.”

“ There is one way in which you could bring her back,” replied Mrs. West, looking up eagerly into his face—that bright, but unsympathising face.

“ Tell me what it is,” he cried with alacrity, “ and trust me for doing it.”

He looked as if he was ready to start off at once on an expedition. Alas ! he was utterly uncomprehending.

“ I would not like to force your inclination in the least,” she said, hesitatingly ; “ but if you loved Esther, you might bring her back as your wife.”

Harry laughed. It was the very thing, he declared. He was quite as ready to marry as to take a header into the mid Pacific. He declared that he loved Esther, and that he would go and propose for her without delay.

“ She will have only the few thousands I have saved for her,” said Mrs. West. “ You know that my husband settled the principal of his fortune on you. If he had lived, it would have been otherwise. He would have yielded to my wish to divide it between you. But now it will belong to both, and I shall die happy.”

She wanted to be alone, and Harry, left to himself, became restless, as usual. He did not know what to do with himself. If he could only see Esther again, he thought he would be happy. Yes ; that was what he wanted to make his life complete ; such a wife as she would make. With her



he would enter into every pleasure—for pleasure, happily, never meant vice to Harry. They would live in England. England was the proper place for a rich man to live in ; but they might take a trip to the antipodes, and see Europe as they went or came. Suddenly, he remembered the Saturday afternoon gatherings at Redhurst, and the general invitation he had had to join them. He thought he would go—and there never was much interval between thought and act with him ; reflection was not in his way. He set off at once.

On the way a brilliant idea came into his head. He knew from Mrs. West that the woman and child they had met at Mr. Wiggett's garden gate were Esther's mother and sister. Mr. Wiggett would know all about them. He would turn in and ask, at any rate.

He opened the gate and turned into the garden, but he saw no one there. Mr. Wiggett was at that moment on his knees in one of the hedged inclosures of the garden. The men were working on a field of celery, at some distance. So he made his way to the house, and, according to his custom of making himself at home wherever he went, opened the door, and went straight into the parlour. A girl peeped out of the kitchen, where she had just cleared up, and informed him that the missus would be down directly. He nodded frankly, as if he knew all about it, and then proceeded to a survey of the room, wheeling round it on his heel. There were two little half-high cupboards, loaded on the top with glass and china, a whole tea-service being set out on the top of one. There was a great variety of chimney-piece ornaments of the same brittle material, some of them quite curious in their way. From among these he picked up a case, which on opening contained a faded daguerreotype—first of the sun-pictures—and took to examining it closely. It must have been done at least fifteen years.

and was a representation of a young matron in a very stiff cap, with flying ribbons, an embroidered collar, and very large square brooch. There, too, on her finger, rather ostentatiously put forward, was the wedding-ring.

It seemed to have taken his fancy, for he held it in his hand when Mrs. Wiggett came into the parlour. She looked rather grimly at her visitor and his occupation—grimly enough, indeed, to have confused most strangers in the same position, but it had no effect on Harry. He looked up from the picture to the lady, and then from the lady to the picture. "Is this taken from you?" he asked, coolly.

"It is," she replied, tartly. "May I ask who I have the pleasure of speaking to?" she added, in her grand style; for Sarah had picked up a genteel phraseology, and could use it with effect, especially on offending handmaidens.

"West is my name," he answered, frankly. "Do you know, this is exactly like a picture of the kind which I have seen before in Australia? indeed, it must have been a duplicate. Do you know anybody there?"

"No," replied Mrs. Wiggett, shortly and sharply.

"It belonged to a fellow I knew out there," he went on, still regarding the picture, and disregarding the reply, as his manner was. "I have just come over myself, and he was coming shortly to find his wife, whom he had left behind—I should have said it was the same exactly; and I never forget faces, or things either. You haven't got married in the meantime, Mrs. Wiggett, have you?"

She did not flinch. "Can you tell me what your business is?" she said, sharply.

"Only to ask you for the address of a friend of yours—Martin Potter by name."

"Then I can't favour you," she answered.

"You don't know? Well, I'm sorry I troubled you," he

replied, quiet unconscious of her expression of hostility, because he knew of no reason for it; and with a bow he walked past the rustling little matron, and out into the gay blossoming garden.

The group seated on the lawn at Hurst Hill saw him coming over the fields, and hailed him as the bearer of good tidings; for his step was light and elastic, and as he drew near he waved his handkerchief—a trick of his whenever he had the slightest pretext for it. Connie ran to the gate to meet him, and to learn what had become of her friend.





## CHAPTER XVI.

### CONNIE'S FRIEND.

**T**HE Vaughans and their party, consisting of Mr. Walton, who was now considered one of the family, and Mr. Carrington, had waited in vain for the appearance of Esther. They had not cared to begin the game, but were still sitting in groups on the lawn, on any spot of shade which was to be found, while the afternoon wore on. Milly and her lover were together, just out of earshot of the rest, engaged in one of those interminable conversations, which outsiders think it would be so interesting to hear, but which they would certainly vote a dreadful bore, if written down here word for word.

The shadows were lengthening; the servants had brought out tea to the idlers, and laid it under the shade of the great elm—which, though planted in the border beyond, threw its boughs over one corner of the lawn—when Harry was descried. Connie threw down her cup in order to hasten towards him, and its fragrant contents were wasted on the thankless soil, to her elder sister's manifest discomfiture. Ever since the engagement of her sister, Kate had been restless and irritable.

As Constance came back by Harry's side, she called out suddenly, "Oh, Katie, Esther is gone."

At that moment Mr. Carrington, charged with a cup of tea for each of the lovers, had turned his back on the ap-

proaching pair, but at these words he wheeled round, and in doing so dropped the contents of one hand on the grass. It was evidently an unlucky tea-drinking. With a clatter of broken china, a laugh from the lovers, and a "Never mind, Mr. Carrington," from Kate, the whole party drew together to hear what Harry had to tell.

He told the story, as far as he knew it, with the unreserve which characterised him, having learnt from Constance that they already knew all that had preceded. He spoke of Martin Potter's threats and of Esther's departure without any profound emotion, and concluded by saying that they would soon have her back. All the time he was speaking, Carrington was looking at him with an expression of profound contempt, which he did not take the least pains to disguise.

"To get her back may not be so easy as you suppose," he said. "Her father had power to claim her, and he has power to detain her."

"Yes," said Mr. Vaughan. "Esther cannot be more than twenty at the utmost, and it is in her father's power to keep her till she is twenty-one; but he is powerless, I should think, under the circumstances, to injure Mrs. West."

"Oh, perfectly," said Mr. Carrington. "No information would lie against her; she is quite safe."

"But, papa, you can surely do something for Esther," said Constance, with a faith in him which nothing ever shook.

"Nobody can do anything if her father should prove obstinate," said Mr. Vaughan; "but I should hardly think he would. It is obviously for the advantage of his child that she should return to Mrs. West; and, on the other hand, there is no advantage which he can reap by detaining her."

"Then why should he have taken her away at all?" said Mr. Carrington.

"I dare say it was to gratify his sense of power," said Mr. Walton, who was adroit at mental analysis. "Besides, it is a question of rich against poor," he continued. "Mrs. West is rich; Martin Potter is poor; he cannot allow her to triumph over him in any matter of right. Depend upon it, there is something of this natural antagonism at the bottom of it."

Then they diverged into the general topics most interesting to all of them—topics in which Kate and her sisters had been accustomed to find interest too. But this afternoon the general welfare was lost sight of, in concern for their friend. Constance begged to be excused, that she might go to Mrs. West at once, and Kate and Milly retired into the house. Before doing so, however, the former turned to Mr. West, and asked if he would stay to dinner. He accepted, unhesitatingly, and Constance carried with her a message to Mrs. West to that effect.

Constance returned from "The Cedars" only just in time to run upstairs and wash her hands before dinner. The bell had already rung, and all the others were in the drawing-room. She came in, therefore, in her morning dress; while the other two were looking their fairest in pretty evening dresses of white muslin adorned with their favourite blue. The consequence was, that from the contrast, Connie in grey quite justified Mr. West's description of her as the "plain one." Moreover, she had been crying; a fact which her sisters could discern, though it probably escaped the notice of any of the gentlemen. Mr. Carrington took her in to dinner, Mr. West having already appropriated Kate.

The gentlemen did not remain more than a quarter of an hour behind the ladies, and no sooner had they joined them than Kate proposed a game. There was plenty of light still, and the lawn looked more tempting than ever. She

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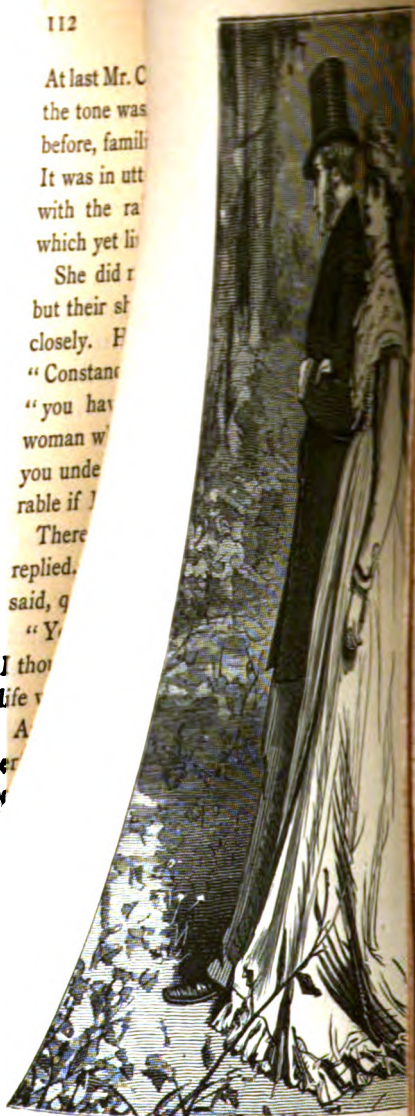
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was warmly seconded by Mr. West, at whom Constance was looking daggers; Milly and Mr. Walton offered no opposition, every phase of existence being equally satisfactory to them just then.

The young people left Mr. Vaughan to his review, and went off to their game.

"I shall take Mr. West in hand," said Kate; "and, Connie, you can take Mr. Carrington." Milly and Mr. Walton being quite content to stand aside.

It was a curious thing to watch Mr. Carrington play. He was as serious and deliberative as if some fate hung on the issue of the game; moreover, he was, at first, singularly unfortunate, while Mr. West's reckless performances were carrying him and his partner to the goal. Kate was guiding him through a series of successes, and both were laughing gaily, when Constance, who stood a little apart, with Mr. Carrington by her side, looked from them to her companion. The look was one of mutual intelligence, at least Constance Vaughan read it thus.

"I wonder," she said, "if I were to disappear from the spot I am standing on, how many people in the world would miss me after half an hour."

"I for one," said Mr. Carrington, shortly; and Constance blushed, and for the first time in her life felt strangely conscious.

They could only talk in disjointed sentences, because of the exigencies of their game. Constance was called away at this point, and Kate's next stroke turning out a failure, Mr. Carrington was called on immediately, and found a savage satisfaction in sending Mr. West's ball to the furthest corner of the lawn, where it bounded off and into the shrubbery. It was getting dusk, so that the ball could not be found, and Constance rather impatiently desired to quit the game. Kate gave it up at once, quite good-humouredly, but

no one seemed inclined to go in-doors, and Milly proposed a stroll to a little wood which skirted the hill, that they might listen to the nightingales. They went in-doors to get some light wraps and to change their shoes, for the dews were already falling.

The evening was one of those which intoxicate the senses with loveliness. The full moon had risen, and was filling the garden with mystic light ; the acacias at the gate looked like trees of fairy-frosted silver, the cups of the tall lilies like so many alabaster lamps; only the white flowers showed their hue, but the scents of all were mingled together in one divine essence.

But the meadow was the loveliest of all ; through the tall uncut grass the ox-eye daisies shone with a wonderful weird beauty, such as they never wear by day. A new wonder thrilled them in the wood—the moonbeams raining through and between the leaves, making them shine like emeralds. Before they reached the wood they had agreed to go forward in perfect silence, and Kate had had to enforce the rule on her companion more than once. But it would not do. Harry would whisper his admiration and his impatience; for the birds—they were few and shy—would not sing. At length, from the distant part of the wood, the first notes came with their peculiar thrilling tenderness. They were answered by nearer ones, and all listened breathlessly while answer and reply, complaining, pleading, caressing, again, and again, and again repeated, made the little thicket ring.

A pause came. Harry would follow in the direction from which the last thick-coming, thrilling notes had sounded, and Kate went with him. Constance was about to follow, but Mr. Carrington laid his hand on her arm, and arrested her. They stood together in the charmed silence, while the sounds of the others' footsteps died away, and in that silence each listened to the voice of his and her own heart.

At last Mr. Carrington whispered his companion's name, and the tone was unlike any tone of his that she had ever heard before, familiar friends as they were. It did not startle her. It was in utter harmony with the enchantment of the hour, with the raining moonbeams and the throbbing melody which yet lingered in their ears.

She did not answer; she did not voluntarily move even; but their shadows on the sward wavered and mingled more closely. He took her passive hand, and laid it on his arm. "Constance," he repeated, in the same earnest whisper, "you have been like a sister to me. You are the only woman whom I really know, except my mother, and I think you understand me better than she does. I shall be miserable if Esther West marries this fellow."

There was a momentary silence before his companion replied. Then her hand tightened on his arm, and she said, quietly, "You love Esther?"

"Yes," he whispered; "I never knew how much till now. I thought my heart was set on a career; but now I feel as if life would be worthless without her."

Another pause, and the silence was dissolved by the wonderful thick-coming melody. If Mr. Carrington had been looking at his companion's face, whitened by the moonlight, its expression might have struck him as something new to the cheerful, friendly girl. It was exalted and refined by passion—a passion of tenderness and devotion—and sweet with the intense sweetness which is wrung from pain.

It was love for another that had sounded in every tone of her companion's voice, and thrilled through every touch, awakening in her a response to which there could be no utterance now, nor for ever, though her heart should ache with it to death. Out of his love he had hurt her thus, though unknowing of the hurt; and out of hers she stood there prepared to strengthen and comfort him.





**"Her long, free, happy girlhood was over."**

"I do not think that she can care for Mr. West," she said. "Mrs. West and he seem to have made it up between them, without reference to Esther. In your place I would not give in." She spoke with her old playfulness, and looked up smiling.

"But how am I even to see her now? I have lost all my opportunities."

"Wait, and I may be able to help you," she answered.

"I knew you would," he replied; and gave the hand that lay on his arm a friendly pressure which sent a shiver through the girl's heart.

A new light had fallen for Constance on the weird white flowers, so disregarded by the light of common day. As she walked through that enchanted meadow, with her hand still resting on Mr. Carrington's arm, she felt that she was no longer a careless girl. Her long, free, happy girlhood was over; and the first act of her womanhood was self-sacrifice.

Mr. Carrington and Mr. West parted with their companions at the garden-gate, sending their respective farewells to Mr. Vaughan, seeing that it was too late to return to the house. Constance passed unnoticed among the others, as the prayer-bell rung on their entrance—passed to her accustomed place, glad and thankful that the refuge of prayer should come between her and her common life and speech. There was that in her face which made it seem older and harder. There was a sadder outlook from the eyes, a firmer compression of the mouth. It was altogether sterner, though the sternness, now and after, was always for herself. The look stamped there for the present would wear away, give place to her old look of vivacity and humour, and to all the play of a quick womanly intellect and a warm heart; but it would come again, and yet again, and fix itself there at last. Constance was one of those women made to sup-

port others, though they themselves are walking with bleeding feet; one of those who pour the balm of consolation out of their own bruised and broken hearts.

But on that night there was no call upon her brave heart. She kissed her father more fondly perhaps, and was more gentle than her wont with her sisters—that was all. Indeed, she was so subdued, that Kate asked her playfully if she had been quarrelling with Mr. Carrington, and she answered with a smile, “No, we are as great friends as ever.”





## CHAPTER XVII.

### AT HOME.

**I**N Saturday afternoons Mary Potter was accustomed to take the domestic drudgery out of the feeble though willing hands of her daughter Sarah, and perform its hardest tasks with her own. She was thus engaged in brightening up the little parlour, when her husband returned with Esther, whom he introduced with very little ceremony. He even felt a kind of savage satisfaction in flinging his proud lady daughter—for he had no doubt she was proud—into a scene of domestic discomfort. She would be all the better able to realise at once the position of a poor man's child.

Mary Potter never looked untidy, whatever she might be doing; but she was heated and fatigued, and the shock of the unexpected meeting seemed about to prove too much for her. She rose from her rubbing, and staggered, and would have fallen, but for the arm which Martin flung around her, while he led her to the little shabby sofa which filled one side of the room. The slight act of kindness on her husband's part, and the look of joyful recognition on Esther's face, revived her. Mother and daughter sat down side by side, and were soon clasped in each other's arms. They were very like each other as they sat thus, allowing for the difference of years, only there was in Esther an infusion of will and power which brightened and vivified all her aspects.



When they looked up, Martin Potter had left the room. Perhaps he wished to allow them time to exhaust the first outburst of feeling, or else he desired to leave to Esther the task of explaining how she had come there.

All this time Sarah had been standing in the background, blacklead-brush in hand, a forlorn, untidy figure. Nothing, not even her love for her mother, had power to keep Sarah tidy at her work—the lack of physical energy conquered her inclination. She felt painfully conscious of straggling hair, a very dirty frock, and fingers bedaubed with metallic black, as she stood watching Esther. But Mary noticed her girl's wistful look, and hastened to say, "This is Sarah, your sister Sarah, my greatest help and comfort."

It was this sympathetic tenderness which made Mary absolute in the hearts of her children, but which was expended as vainly as water on the rock upon Martin Potter. Tears filled Sarah's eyes, as attention was thus directed to her. Esther went up to her, and, though the girl would have held her back, kissed her on the forehead, without thinking how far her pretty pure dress might be soiled by the contact, a contingency to which her sister was quite alive. If a sudden pang not unlike jealousy had shot through the poor child's heart, it vanished at the sisterly caress. Pushing back her hair from her brow with her blackened fingers, she retired hastily to the back kitchen, content from that hour to be Esther's slave.

After a time the entrance of little Mary, who at once claimed acquaintance with Esther, brought back Mrs. Potter's mind to her domestic difficulties. The great difficulty which had to be met at present was that of housing a twelfth person in the space already insufficient for eleven. It must be accomplished in some way, however, as Mary knew. She had learned, though in a softened form, the history of Esther's appearance, and that her stay was likely

to be more than a temporary one. She was greatly perplexed and saddened by her husband's conduct, so that after the first joy of meeting, she could not but grieve over Esther's coming. Indeed, a joy whose source is poisoned to us is often more bitter than an actual sorrow.

Leaving Esther and little Polly to entertain each other, she went to hold a consultation with Sarah as to what was to be done. She found the girl ready, nay, eager, to give up anything to her new-found sister—to sleep in the coal-cellar, if necessary. Whenever there was any sacrifice of the kind to be made, it was generally Sarah who made it, on the principle of the willing horse being made to carry the burden. At last it was settled that she should give up her room, which she shared with little Mary, and sleep on the parlour sofa, by no means a bed of roses, for its springs were long since gone, and its stuffing unpleasantly hard and lumpy. This settled, they both set to work to make the tiny box of a place as neat as possible, and this being done, the stranger was at length shown to her room.

In their absence, Esther had had time to observe many things. She noticed a row of cane-bottomed benches, ranged round the wall in that half of the room called the back parlour; and, on questioning Polly, found out that they were for "the pupils," who were coming back on Monday. She saw that the once resplendent pattern of the Kidderminster carpet was nearly effaced by the ceaseless tread of little feet, and even riddled with holes, though these had been carefully mended.

A worn and faded wax-cloth cover gave a look of shabby respectability to a deal table with painted legs. Everything was shabby and worn, and yet carefully kept. It was the same in the tiny room into which she was ushered. Things that ought to have been white, were white no longer—never could be made white again by any process of washing; and yet they were clean. The mother, knowing to what her

child had been accustomed, had given her of her best, robbing her own room of one or two articles of simple furniture, in order to make hers more comfortable. But nothing could redeem the sordidness of the place. It had an unwholesome air about it in the hot July afternoon. Through the open window she looked out on its surroundings; a sort of court, of triangular shape, lay beneath, surrounded by houses, except on the side occupied by a broken-down workshop. The floor of the enclosure was of black beaten earth; not a blade of grass, not even a weed would grow there, as Mr. Wiggett had said. The mere unloveliness was depressing; and the life that went on round that court seemed more depressing still. Esther had seen the poverty of the country-people who, as regards money and the means of living, were poorer even than these; but the hovel in the midst of the fields had nothing repulsive in its aspect, as had these dingy dwellings. Esther sickened as she looked at them, and blamed herself for sickening.

Tea was laid in the parlour when she came down. Sarah had called in Bob and Walter, and their mother had earnestly desired them to be on their best behaviour, which they readily promised, Master Bob beginning with the exclamation, "Oh, my eyes!" and enlarging those organs till they seemed about to suffer protrusion. After all, he behaved like a gentleman. Boy-like, he was greatly influenced by beauty; and after a good long stare at Esther, he made up his mind that she was "a stunner"—a conclusion which he privately communicated to Walter in the back yard after tea. He even paid her extravagant attentions, in the way of handing bread and butter, which he consumed himself to an alarming extent.

Then there was an interval of comparative quiet in which the mother and daughter learned much of each other's lives. Esther questioned her mother eagerly about the school, and

found that it was not the poorer children of the neighbourhood whom Mary taught, but those of a much more exclusive community of small tradesmen, who were content to pay sixpence a week that their little girls might sit genteelly in a carpeted parlour, with bare arms and shoulders, and ringleted heads, no matter how little they learned. But Mary did her work well and conscientiously. Every seat in her small room was filled ; and Esther found that her ambition was to get a larger room somewhere, and gather together a greater number of children. Schools like hers abounded in the neighbourhood ; they were formed one year, or even quarter, and broken up the next ; but, unlike her, the teachers had no qualifications whatever. Mary had been a teacher before certificates were common ; but she had seen the value of the test as a guarantee of competency, and after coming to London, over and above the toils of her family and her little school, she had qualified herself for the examination, and had actually passed. " If I could only teach a little music," she said, " the parents would willingly pay me three times as much."

Thus the evening wore on. Martin Potter did not return ; and Esther could see that her mother glanced up uneasily from her sewing whenever a heavy foot passed the parlour window. Mary had again to go away to look after domestic matters, and especially to prepare the little supper to which all the working members of the family gathered on Saturday night. In the interval, Esther sat down and wrote to Mrs. West a letter, which Bob carried to the post in triumph. In the letter she still addressed her as " mamma," and its contents were very tender and affectionate. She had not lost or transferred in haste the love of years ; but in her heart she already called Mary " mother " ; and the deeper and more passionate feelings of her nature were stirred towards the working, sorrowing woman, as they had never been stirred

before. But with delicate, instinctive shrinking from giving pain, she had scarcely mentioned her.

At length Emily and Agnes came in, both complaining of heat and headache, and looking not a little unamiable. Mary, watching the impression which they made on Esther, and she on them, saw, with the quickness which belongs to such tender natures, that it was less favourable than that produced by any of the others. The meal was a constrained one. The two lads, Martin and Willie, were unsociable, with the utter unsociableness of their kind. The twins would sit together and talk together in undertones. Esther did not know that it was a custom of theirs, and that, in particular moods, they would treat the whole family as outsiders, against whom they were in league for mutual defence and comfort. Mary, too, was ill at ease; her husband's presence might not have conduced to cheerfulness, but his prolonged absence was unusual and depressing. She had waited for him as long as she could; but when once begun, she rather hastened the meal, in order that he might have his in greater comfort alone, if that was what he wanted. Esther was not sorry when it was over, and the little party had broken up.

Having gone up to her own room, she closed the door softly, for fear of disturbing little Mary, already asleep. It was still very hot: the child had tossed off her coverings, and lay quite across the bed, so that, without lifting her, there was no possibility of getting into it. Esther knew nothing about children; she did not know that she might have lifted her into her place with perfect impunity. Shading the candle with her hand, she stood looking on the wonderful beauty of a sleeping child—and Mary was a very lovely one. The half-naked limbs were perfect in their fragile grace; the long lashes lay on the slightly flushed cheek; the parted lips had a look of appealing helplessness and innocence; the lightly heaving breast, in which dwelt the

sacred mystery of life, made Esther experience an emotion of awe which she had never felt before. She did not disturb the child; but she covered her over gently, for the window was still open; and putting out her light she sat down by the bed to think. There was light enough of the moon to enable her to watch little Mary's face, and the bed was so close to the window, that she could look out into the court beneath.

There were sounds both without and within the house. She heard the murmur of voices—her brothers and sisters talking together in their own rooms. In such houses one hears every word almost. Without, people went and came at intervals. She could not help watching them. Within, they passed and re-passed the lighted windows, scantily curtained, and open for the heat. Voices reached her ear through these same open windows—voices of various tones, oftenest jarring ones, perhaps because these were loudest.

The moon was now shining full into the court; full on the black crooked chimnëy-stacks, out of which it made fantastic, unlovely shadows; full on the rugged roof of the broken-down workshop, and on the mean dwellings. The same moon was shining on "The Cedars," on the noble trees, in their grand beauty and majestic calm, on the fair garden of Redhurst, and on the sweet and pleasant country all about. What a contrast! Then she thought of her friends—of Mrs. West, with her tender grace; of Constance, the one among her companions whom she really loved; of Harry—somehow his face and figure did not harmonise with sadness and with moonlight, and he flitted out of her thoughts. Then she thought of Milly and her happy love, and of the life that awaited her; and of Constance and her friend Benjamin Carrington, who would one day love her with more than a friendly love. Their future lay before them like a sunny garden. She had entered on a wilderness. She was only a woman, and she wept long and bitterly.



## CHAPTER XVIII.

### VIGILS.

**G**RADUALLY the sounds died away, the house grew quiet. One by one the lights went out in the windows. Esther took out her watch, Mrs. West's gift on her fifteenth birthday, and looked at the hour by the light of the moon. It was a quarter past twelve. Little Mary had fallen into a deeper sleep, and lay quite still. Just then there floated up to her, also coming through one of the open windows, the verse of a hymn, sung in a subdued voice, evidently a man's. It was too low to have reached the ear among the other murmurs which had filled the air an hour ago, but now in the silence it was quite distinct. She leaned to listen, but could not catch the words, with the exception of the refrain, plaintive in its monotony. It ran :

“ On the other side of Jordan,  
Where the tree of life is blooming,  
There is rest for the weary !  
There is rest for the weary !  
There is rest for me ! ”

The hymn came to an end, and then followed a murmur, which she knew was prayer. She heard no words, but involuntarily she bent her head, and paused from her own sad thoughts until it was over, and as she did so a sense of peace fell upon her troubled spirit. She had been feeling that her fate was hard ; to be snatched out of a life of ease

and refinement, where she had been surrounded with grace and beauty, where everything that was ungracious and unlovely was hidden from the sight, and plunged into the ungracious, unlovely life she saw around her. She had not accepted such a life as her life. Her mother was good and gracious, and little Mary was very sweet; but she thought rather of lifting them out of their hard lot than of sharing it with them. There was the natural hope in her heart that the change was only temporary; that she would not be allowed to remain where she was; that her father would yield, and that she would go back to Mrs. West, and be allowed to help her mother and little Mary, and the rest, and make their lives more like what her own had hitherto been. Poor Esther! she did not take into account, sensible though she was, that suppers for ten do not cook themselves, except in the "Arabian Nights' Entertainments." But the thought troubled and oppressed her, nevertheless, that this life had been led by her mother and her sisters, that this lovely little Mary had grown up in the midst of it, and that it was the life of all these men, women, and children sleeping around her. "God lets them live this life; why should I be favoured? Why should I lead one seemingly so much richer, and easier, and happier; and with something higher in it, too, than the ease, and the fulness, and the happiness, for did not these give freedom to lead the nobler life of the mind and the spirit, from which those must be debarred who are shut in by the prison walls of circumstances to sordid thoughts and earthly desires?"

That hymn and prayer, floating on the air of the close court from one of those dingy dwellings, came as an answer to these thoughts. Here was the outlook of the poor, meagre, dull, sordid life—an outlook whose horizon was heaven. Might it not contain possibilities of a loftier faith, as much loftier as its earthly basis was lower; of a nobler



effort, as much nobler as its task was harder; of even a richer joy, as much fuller and richer as it was emptier of mere earthly bliss? A feeling, nay, almost a faith, that this was so, took possession of Esther's mind. One of those fruitful seeds of spiritual life, which fall as it were at random, had floated in on her soul from that human breath, and was destined to take root in its soil and flourish there. She found herself wondering who the singer was, and picturing to herself (a picture which she afterwards found to be utterly false) a man on the verge of the grave, whose hopes and aspirations were nigh to their realisation, the rest for which he longed.

At length she remembered that she had never heard her father return. The thought came with a slight noise heard within the house, the movement of some one anxious to move noiselessly. The street-door was underneath her window, and she then heard it opened and closed gently. The person admitted, however, had no thought of moving gently, but came in with a loud, and, she thought, uncertain step. Another door was closed, which muffled the sounds, but Esther could hear a harsh tone and angry words. She went to the door of her own room, and, opening it softly, stood upon the landing. There she could hear plainly the low pleading voice of her mother, alternating with that other voice of terror. Nothing, in the excited state of her nerves, seemed too terrible to happen now. She stood trembling and with clasped hands, ready to descend, and, if need were, die by the hands of a murderer.

Mary Potter, during the hours of Esther's vigil, had had one of her own of unmingled bitterness. At first she had worked on with nimble fingers, and a heart only a little more anxious than usual. She was, indeed, chiefly anxious to provide her poor, tired, sleepy Sarah with a place of rest, which, under the circumstances, could not be managed till

all the rest had retired. But, at length, Sarah had gone to sleep on the sofa dressed as she was, and Mary still worked on, though with ever-growing apprehensions of she knew not what terrible calamity in store for her.

At last she could work no longer, her fingers trembled at the task. Her whole soul was intent on waiting. Once or twice she raised her clasped hands from her knee, and looked upward, as if appealing to the Divine pity; but she uttered no word. Her tongue cleaved to the roof of her mouth. Time seemed lengthening out into eternity, an eternity of suffering—even that seemed conceivable then. Oh! if something had happened to Martin, and she should never see him again; if he passed in his estrangement out of the living world! Mary felt as if she would die gladly only to meet him reconciled. What were her children to her in comparison with him, her husband? and the days of his passionate wooing came back upon her, making her heart burn within her.

There was his step at last. She crept out of the room, and forgot, in her eagerness, to rouse her daughter and send her away. Yes, it was Martin, who went past her in the narrow passage with a heavy tread, and staggered in at the parlour door. Martin, her Martin, who had prided himself, and justly, on his sobriety, almost abstinence, who looked at her with those drunken eyes, that unnatural scowl, that expression which is next to madness in its horror.

He sat down and gazed at her with drunken defiance. Then he caught sight of Sarah, and cried, "What is that girl doing there?"

Martin was a temperate man, and, moreover, one of those men who cannot be intemperate with impunity—whom drink plunges into a state of irritation bordering on insanity. He seemed about to rise and seize upon the girl, when Mary interposed.

"Let her alone, Martin. She was very tired," pleaded the mother, "and I allowed her to fall asleep there while I was working." Not a reproach, not even an allusion to the lateness of the hour, passed Mary's lips—only she could not hide the pallor which had overspread her face from the faintness at her heart, nor conceal the frightened look in her eyes.

Whether or not he had sense to see these tokens of dread and to resent them, he grew worse than before. "Get up," he cried; and Sarah, roused from her sleep, looked up with a half-suppressed cry to see her father standing over her with an expression she had never seen before. She started up in alarm, and again he was about to seize her, perhaps only to thrust her out of the room, when Mary again interposed, with the terrible agony of fear in her eyes.

It is in such moments murder is done. Martin Potter gave his wife a push, and she staggered back against the window, whose sharp corner struck her head. The injury was not great, nor the physical pain more than Mary could bear, but the thrust had hurt her, and she wailed out, "Oh, Martin!"

It seemed to sober him, for he muttered something about not meaning it, and added, "Go away to bed."

"Are you not coming?" she asked; "or will you take a bit of supper first?"

"No, I will take nothing; leave me here," was the response; and Mary was obliged to follow Sarah out of the room.

"You must go in beside Em and Aggy," said Mary to the still sleep-bewildered girl; "your father is not well to night."

She took a light and led Sarah up to her sisters' room, immediately below Esther's. Then there was a whispering, and a murmur of awakened sleepers, and Sarah had found a refuge.

All this time Esther was standing leaning against the shabby stair-rail on the dark landing ; but when her mother came out again, she ventured down a few steps. Mary started when she looked up and saw her. They looked in each other's pale and sorrowful faces, and each knew all the other had to tell. Mary laid her finger on her lips, and with an imploring gesture motioned Esther to retire, she herself vanishing softly into her own room—not to sleep, any more than her daughter, but to watch out the remainder of that miserable night. Once and again, when all was silent, she took her candle and stole down to see her husband in uneasy slumber, seated where she had left him, with flushed face and labouring breath. The third time she came the summer dawn was brightening in the sky. Her husband's face too had changed, and he looked haggard and worn. As she stood regarding him he opened his eyes and met hers, so tender, so pitiful. He shut his again, murmuring, " I can't bear the light."

"Are you ill?" she asked, going up to him.

"My head is like to split," he answered.

She went still closer to him and bent over his chair. He suffered his head to rest on her bosom, and after a little said, "It's the first and the last time, Mary."

The wife restrained her tears, restrained even her kisses, and only touched the bent head with her lips. "You will come upstairs and go to bed for a few hours," she whispered, "and let me bring you a cup of tea. I should like one myself."

And Martin Potter rose and followed her, putting his hand to his brow, which throbbed at every step.



## CHAPTER XIX.

### PHILIP—EVANGELIST.

**A**FTER seeing her husband fall into an uneasy slumber, Mary had stolen softly upstairs and into Esther's room, to find her on her knees before the bed with her face buried in her hands. Mary touched her gently, and she rose, with that strange startled look in her eyes which comes from being suddenly recalled from a state of concentrated emotion. "Why are you not in bed?" whispered her mother.

"I did not like to disturb her;" and Esther pointed to the little sleeper stretched across the couch.

"That will never do," said her mother, lifting the child and laying her in her place without in the least awakening her. "Now, you must go to rest. Your father has been very ill. It is the first time in his life that I have ever seen him so," she added, with a tact that met the truth, if the truth had occurred to Esther, as well as the half-truth which she wished her to believe.

And after her mother left her, Esther, unaccustomed to watching, had fallen asleep in the dawn, and slept far into the morning.

When at length she awoke, the child was gone. She had been carried away at the hour when she usually rose by the ever-watchful Mary. Though the morning was far advanced, there was perfect silence in the house, and when

Esther came down she was astonished to find that the household had been long astir. The two lads had taken their younger brothers, down to the mischief-loving Johnny, away to the park, which partly accounted for the silence that prevailed. But even Sarah had been creeping about all the morning in a more than usually subdued manner. All had moved softly and spoken in whispers, as soon as the words had passed from one to another, "Father is ill."

Yes, Martin Potter was ill. But, with the fierce resolution of his character, he would not submit to be ill. He would wrestle with his suffering and overcome it. He did not know that his wife had kept the house quiet for him; he would have resented it if he had known that she did so, though he was ready enough on ordinary occasions to find fault with the noise. He would not lie still, though his head throbbed wildly and made every movement anguish; nor allow Mary to darken the room, though every ray of light shot through his eye-balls, and seemed to scorch and wither his brain like fire. He would go out and "throw it off." So he said, and so he did.

"Wait a very little, Martin, and I will go with you," Mary had ventured to say.

"You think I'm not fit to be trusted," he answered bitterly, and went away alone.

Emily and Agnes, disregarding a hint from their mother, that they might ask Esther to accompany them, went off together to church or chapel. They were disobeying their father in the spirit, though they stood in sufficient awe of him to obey in the letter of his commandments. They wore the white net bonnets with an alteration. White flowers had been substituted for blue, and the effect was still sufficiently light and airy. They had sat up the night before making another out of the same cheap material, in the place of the one that had been hopelessly crushed. They had also resolved to

keep out of their father's sight, and they rejoiced to see him depart. They had possessed themselves, moreover, of cheap lockets, whose long blue velvet ribbons were to be tied behind after they left the house. Since there was no longer necessity for concealment they put on their ornaments, and went out boldly with their blue streamers. Mary sighed over the girls as she saw them go. They were the most untoward of her children. Doubtless they had friends of their own to meet—boy-lovers, as is the custom of their class in London—for they flatly refused to allow little Mary to go with them.

Then Esther, seeing that the little one fretted to get out into the air and sunshine, volunteered to take her for a walk; so they sallied forth together, and were soon in Queen's Road, Chelsea. Esther had never lived in a city, had never even seen the poor quarter of a great town, and the road up which she allowed little Mary, in all the pride of superior knowledge of the locality, to lead her, was to her a revelation from the depths. Many of the shops were open and as busy as on a week-day. There were cast-off garments hanging at the doors; stalls at which scraps of meat were being turned over by dirty fingers—food which sickened the girl even to look at. And the men and women looked as if they had not slept the night before; indeed, as if they had never slept at all, so worn and weary were they. Then so foul too, without and within, that Esther caught away her little sister from contact and hearing with such haste that the child stumbled, and would have fallen but for one of these dreadful beings from whom she shrank in terror and disgust. A bloated woman caught little Mary on the other side—an Irishwoman, for the brogue was strong in which she said, "Take care, darlint." Mary did not shrink, but smiled back in the woman's face, like the sunbeam she was. Esther felt something like rebuke from her sister's childish confidence.



“Take care, darlint.”





There was a corner round which a little crowd had gathered. Some one was speaking in the midst of it. The crowd consisted of one or two men in fustian jackets, with short pipes in their mouths; several women, and a number of little children. Mary began pulling at Esther's hand. She evidently wanted her to join the crowd. "It's Philip," she cried, in explanation.

"And who is Philip?" said Esther, suffering herself to be led to the edge of the crowd.

That was beyond little Mary's powers. That it was Philip was enough for her, and she thought it ought to have been enough for the whole world. "He's Philip," she repeated. And Esther found herself standing among the poor women.

The man in the midst had given out a hymn and was proceeding to sing it. As soon as Esther heard the voice she recognised that of her neighbour, which had fascinated her the night before. This accounted for little Mary's knowledge of him. Esther longed to see him, but he was of small stature, and she was unwilling to press forward. She waited till the hymn was sung. Then, taking advantage of the elevation of a door-step, the preacher raised himself above the crowd, and began to pray.

He was a small and slight young man, with a perfectly pale face, of which the features were boldly and finely cut; but over them, from time to time, passed a nervous twitching which was painful to Esther to look at. The hair was thin, and of a light golden brown, and he wore his beard of the same colour. It was a face full of keen intelligence. A passion of kindness beamed out of the full grey eyes. Now they were closed, and the white face took the rapt concentration of one who communes with the Invisible.

The sermon came next, and still Esther stood and listened. She could not help herself now, for little Mary, who had slipped hold of her hand during the prayer, had

gently wormed her way through the crowd, and was now standing at the preacher's knees with eyes intent upon his lips.

The discourse was very brief. It did not occupy more than five minutes. The preacher was not eloquent. At first he spoke with hesitancy, and not without iteration; but he gained in power as he proceeded. Taking for his text the invitation, "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest," "I have not far to go to find those whom Christ invites," he said. "You are weary and heavy laden, all of you, unless you have come into this rest; and not you only, but all men, however easy and light their lives may seem to you. The rich are heavy laden with their riches, just as you are with your poverty, only they trust in their riches to give them rest, and you cannot trust in your poverty. No man can rest till he has found God, and save in Christ no man can find him, though he would search the whole universe. Except in Christ we cannot know the heart of God, his pity for us, his love to us. Therefore he only can give us rest; therefore he is our salvation, who verily died that we might live. For this rest is not the rest beyond the grave. It is a living rest, enabling us to carry every burden except sin; that burden we must lay down at the Saviour's feet; from that his power must loose us and let us go. Oh, brothers and sisters, how long will you carry that heavy burden? How long will you be weary, while he is waiting to give you rest?"

It was not so much the words that penetrated the hearts of the listeners. The same words, read or spoken, might have fallen as so many dead letters upon eye or ear; it was the spirit that breathed through them, and gave them the force of living realities. It was the intense conviction on the part of the speaker that he was holding forth to his

hearers the word of life, which could lift them above all weariness, and dulness, and earthliness, into a region of spiritual peace and joy. An atmosphere was around him, full of clearness and of sunshine, as that of the mountain-tops, and he was calling to the dwellers in a dark and fetid prison to come forth and share his light, and life, and joy. Esther felt herself irresistibly attracted to the preacher, with that subtle attraction which we feel towards some natures; that longing to enter into a communion of spirit with them, to see as they see, to worship as they worship. When the brief sermon had come to an end in a few words of blessing, the little throng dispersed, and Mary, laying hold of the preacher's hand, bent her steps to his, leaving Esther to follow, which she did. As she walked on close behind them, she found herself trying to catch the words he was speaking to the child, but could not for the noises of the streets, so bewildering to an ear accustomed to the breathing calm of country ways.

At length they reached the river, and were about to cross the bridge, when Mary looked back, and Philip, following the child's eyes, encountered Esther's gaze.

"Had we not better go home, Mary?" she said. "I am afraid we shall lose ourselves."

She felt, rather than saw, that Philip was regarding her with a look of keen, but not impertinent, scrutiny. It was to his child companion, however, that he spoke. "Are you with this lady?" he asked.

Esther made answer, "I am her sister," while Mary lisped her "Yes."

"I have never seen you," he replied, looking perplexed; "and I thought I had seen the whole family."

"I have been brought up away from home," she rejoined, colouring slightly.

"And are you going to live there now?" he asked, find-

ing that in her manner and tone which he felt to be incongruous with the surroundings in Sutton Alley.

She hesitated, and then replied, "I think so."

"Then we shall be near neighbours," he said.

"It was you whom I heard singing last night?" she ventured to say.

"I hope I did not disturb you," was the reply.

"Oh, no," she answered, hastily; and then they all lapsed into silence, and stood looking on the lovely reach of river sweeping past the grounds of the old hospital. In a few minutes, during which Philip had seemed to have forgotten those who were standing beside him, he moved, and said, "I am going on now." Mary still clung to his hand.

"Ought we not to return home?" said Esther, gently. "I'm afraid we shall not find our way back."

He stooped and questioned the child concerning her knowledge of the locality; and as she gave a very confused account of the way home, he offered to accompany them, at least for a part of it. "I was going to preach once more in the park," he said, "but I shall come out again in the afternoon."

Esther now conjectured that he was a missionary, though his dress was that of a common workman, and his ungloved hands looked hard and brown.

"Do you preach every day?" she asked, for they were proceeding in silence, Philip's manner, like his speech, having a kind of hesitancy, which sometimes broke into abruptness, and seemed to Esther, then, almost ungracious.

"No," he replied, in this manner of his, "I work at the forge on week-days."

Again they marched on in silence—a silence which Esther would not break again.

"You have never lived in London?" he said, at length.

"Never," she answered. "I never saw such a sight as

I have seen to-day. It is terrible. If preaching would save these men and women, I think every man, and every woman too, would be bound to preach to them."

"So I think," he answered. "'Do the work of an evangelist;' the hammer seems to ring it on the anvil all the week. But you doubt if preaching will do it," he said, abruptly, almost sharply. "What do you think would save them?"

"We——" She forgot she was no longer rich; had no longer any title to, or claim on, riches. "We," she said, "must give up everything—all our wealth. It seems to me we must be willing to live and die for them to do them any good."

"Well, you're not so far wrong. I thought you were going to say better houses and better schools would save them, and I know that it won't. God meant men to live in good houses, no doubt. He never meant them to house worse than the beasts. He meant us all the physical good we are capable of, and he meant it for all; of that we may be quite sure. But he meant more than that; else there's no meaning in all this misery. He will not have life fair without and foul within. He will not let us be content with an animal's happiness. The misery does not come from without; you can't take it away by any social science whatever. These people would foul the fairest house you could put them into, and sicken themselves on the most wholesome fare. I know there are some who say, 'Improve the body, and the soul will improve;' but I take it the other way is the right one: Improve the soul, and the improvement of the body will follow."

Esther was listening with eyes bent on the ground; little Mary, like the link between them, holding a hand of each.

"But how are their souls to be reached?" said she, earnestly. "Words are weak; and, besides, they seem as

it were to speak another language. I only meant that deeds might do more than words; that one could scarcely reach them with only words; that it would need some great sacrifice of ours to make them, in the faintest way, realise the sacrifice of Christ—our greatest love to make them understand the least of God's."

She spoke with kindling fervour and eloquence, as she had never spoken in her life before. The beautiful dawn of the spirit was on her cheeks and in her eyes.

There was an eagerness in the glance that sprang to meet hers. "You are ready, then, to give up all for Christ?" he cried.

Blunt, personal, impertinent, such words have been called before now, and such words are often spoken neither well nor wisely; but then they were exquisitely timed, as the stroke on the glowing iron. They vibrated through Esther's inmost heart.

"I," she said, startled, and in tears—"I have nothing to give."

"You have yourself," he said, gently; and lifting his hat, he murmured good-bye, and left her standing, close to home.





## CHAPTER XX.

### STRUCK DOWN.

**W**HEN Martin Potter left his home and walked out into the streets on that sunny Sabbath morning, he hardly knew whither he was going. He seemed to be as one walking on burning ploughshares; and as one, by a stretch of imagination, may be supposed to do in such a case, he almost ran, quickening the agony as if to get it over. When he reached the bridge, making for the waste places of Battersea Fields, he stood still for a little and looked over the parapet upon the river. The light breeze which swept over it gave him a moment's ease. He took off his hat, and allowed it to play on his burning forehead. Through all the pain not only his senses, but his intellect, seemed exalted into a keenness which of itself was torture. The struggle of his life was intensified for him—the hitherto vain struggle to rise. He clenched his teeth, and muttered through them, “And even yet I will win or die! I can't play the beast.”

And now the very breeze that had cooled at first seemed to burn, and he turned away and crossed the bridge with a strange sensation that it was sinking under him. On the other side, after wandering aimlessly up and down, he at length seated himself on the river bank. Then a strange feeling came over him that he was really in darkness—in darkness in the broad sunshine—he and the whole universe.



He knew he was sitting in the sun, but the river ran before him black as ink. He looked up into the sky : it was clear, cloudless, but black—black as night. The boats as they glided past were black—black as death. He could endure it no longer. He rose and took his way back to the bridge. There he stood again leaning over, till the horrible sinking came upon him again. Down, down he went! the inky heavens closed over him, the inky river awaited him; now he floated away upon it. He had sunk in a swoon upon the bridge.

First, one or two children gathered, gazing awestruck; then some men and women passed on the other side, saying, "Oh, never mind; he's drunk." Then a rough stirred him with his foot, and said, "You'd better get up out o' that, or bobby'll be at you."

Martin Potter's hat was crushed over his eyes, so that no one could see his face; and when the policeman did come, he fell upon the same charitable supposition as the other passers-by. With a more peremptory action of his foot, not unlike a kick, indeed, he told him to get up. But the man could neither obey nor feel; whereupon the policeman made up his mind to take him off to the station, and looked round for help.

And in the station Martin Potter might have raved out the night, but for Philip's returning feet. Here was a human being cast by the wayside; that was enough for him, as it was for his Master when he walked in Galilee.

"Dead drunk," muttered the representative of the law, as Philip stopped before the prostrate man.

"All the more need to see after him," thought Philip; and stooping down, he raised his hat and saw his neighbour Martin Potter.

"You know him!" said the policeman, as Philip uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"Yes, I know him," answered the latter, frankly, "and I never yet saw him drunk. He is ill: he has fainted."



**"He had sunk in a swoon on the bridge."**



"He don't look much like a sick man," said the policeman; but Philip had quickly removed him out of his crouching position by the wall of the bridge, and laid him down flat on his back; then running to the river, which was at full tide, he drenched his cotton handkerchief in it, and returning, laid it on Martin Potter's forehead. In a few minutes Potter's chest began to heave and struggle, and at length with a groan he came to himself, and looked up in Philip's face.

"You are ill," said the latter, gently.

"I chose to make a beast of myself last night," replied Martin Potter, struggling to raise himself, and looking rather resentfully at Philip; "that's all."

The policeman walked away, content to leave the recovering man in Philip's hands, also content in having his judgment of the case verified to some extent.

"Let me help you," said Philip, lingering; for there was more than a last night's fit of intemperance in the haggard face beside him.

Potter rose, and was about to refuse the offered help, but, as he rose, he felt his limbs bend beneath his weight, and he clutched almost fiercely at Philip's arm.

"It's hard that a man like me can't get drunk for once in his life without suffering like this for it. I know fellows who can do it any day of their lives, and be none the worse for it."

"That seems the harder to me," answered his companion; "but there's more the matter with you than that, it seems to me. Have you ever had the fever?"

Philip meant the typhus fever, the deadly scourge which lays the strong man low.

"I never was sick in my life," said Potter. "You don't think I've got the fever?" he added, with quick apprehension in his voice.

"Tell me how you feel," said Philip; "I've been through it myself."

Martin Potter described the sensations he had experienced, and Philip shook his head.

"I fear you are in for it," he replied. "You must go to bed as soon as you get home, and call in the doctor. It's no use fighting against it when it has hold of you. It's best to give in at once."

"I'll never give in," answered the unhappy man, looking at his companion with eyes in which there was delirium to be read.

Philip's mouth quivered like a woman's as he turned away his head, saying to himself, "Poor fellow, I hope he will pull through."

It was all that Philip could do to get Martin Potter safely to his own home. With Philip's help he was put to bed, and a neighbouring practitioner called in, who declared that the patient had a violent attack of fever upon him. Philip had remained till the doctor came, and he now offered to share with Mary the task of nursing her husband. This, however, she declined, and Philip rose to go. "It may want a man's strength to keep him quiet in the night," he said, as he took his leave, "but you can call me at any hour."

"Thank you, thank you," said Mary, clasping his hand. Then he bowed a little awkwardly to Esther, kissed little Mary, who seemed to expect it, and went away.

Not for a moment, on that day, did Mary quit her husband's pillow. Esther—for it was she who took her vacant place in the household—kept all quiet without, and within the darkened room the wife kept watch, feeling that there lay all life for her.

Esther did not find her post quite a sinecure; but her very strangeness served to check the more rebellious of her

subjects. Then the elder lads, who had stood aloof, seeing the sweetness and patience which she brought to bear upon the troublesome Johnny, came to her help, and carried him off after dinner for a long afternoon in the park. They were old enough to understand the extent of the calamity that had fallen upon the house, and to become very grave under its shadow. Sarah drudged on noiselessly, sometimes creeping upstairs, and sitting hot and wearied on the steps opposite to the room where her father lay, till she heard a murmur from within, and then venturing to peep in and ask, by telegraphic signs, if her mother wanted anything. The twins, as usual, lived their life apart, though sharing in the general concern. They went out again in the afternoon; but Esther noticed that the blue streamers were suppressed for the present.

She could hardly believe her senses as she felt herself moving in the midst of this strange new life—so real, so vivid, so full of palpitating anxiety. All her past life seemed as a dream to her. The reality of living was with the suffering present, not with that easy, enjoying past. The hot afternoon passed over; tea-time came, and all the family had gathered again to what was their evening meal, when Sarah, who had taken up some tea to her mother, asked Esther to go up and speak to her. She left the room at once, and her going was the signal for a breaking out of repressed spirits. "Doesn't she give us lots of butter!" said Bob, with his mouth quite full, while Master Johnny's fist made for the sugar-basin.

"If she don't look out there'll be nothing left for to-morrow," said Walter.

"Bob, you're a greedy fellow," said Martin. "She"—indicating Esther—"doesn't know the ways of the house, and you're taking advantage." So they went on wrangling.

Mary, meantime, was consulting Esther as to the best

way of keeping her little scholars from assembling on Monday; and Esther undertook to write about a dozen notes, and send the boys round with them, as the children were living in the neighbourhood. Writing materials were procured, and the notes, stating that owing to serious illness in the family, Mrs. Potter's "classes for young ladies" must be discontinued for the present, were dispatched.





## CHAPTER XXI.

### THE BROKEN LADDER.

**B**EFORE the evening closed the doctor came again, but only to find his patient worse, as indeed he had expected. "The fever has been hanging about him for some time," he said to Mary; "but he has fought it off till now."

Had he been complaining of illness during the past week?

No, there had been no complaint; but Mary had no doubt in her own mind that he had suffered without complaining, and the suffering accounted for his increased irritability and gloom. It might account also for the intoxication of the previous night. He had probably gone on drinking, in the hope of throwing off the depression of the illness with which he was struggling.

Thus Mary strove with all her gentle wisdom to excuse her husband to herself. Might not the same cause have led to his conduct with regard to Esther? Mary could not shut her eyes to the wrong inflicted on her daughter, to all outward appearance at least. "Things are so different here to what you have been accustomed to," said she, almost ashamed that she should see the shifts to which they were put in arranging the accommodation for the night. This she did on the landing beside the door within which she kept her watch, resisting all entreaties that she herself should rest while she provided for the others. "He



never would have brought you here if he had been quite himself," she added, in a lower tone. "He has been suffering all the past week; and, listen, he is quite delirious now."

Mary paused, and they stood and listened to the murmurs which came from within the room. They grew louder and more distinct. He fancied himself bearing a heavy load and mounting a ladder. "Hold fast! Steady it!—steady it!" he called, in a voice suppressed with anxiety. "There! I knew it was rotten; I knew it would not bear the weight. What a gap is left! I can't get over it! I tell you I can't—I'm done for! Oh, God! my head!"

"If you only knew," said Mary, weeping, "how hard he has fought to get up the ladder, and how bitterly he has failed. You cannot know how bitter failure is to a man like him. He was so eager, so strong, so steady, and, but for the failure, he would have been so good. If he had but succeeded he would have been so different." She looked at Esther through her tears, as if appealing for belief, appealing doubtfully too, and she saw on the girl's face a keener anguish of sympathy than her own. "I wish you had never come here," she whispered.

"No, you must not wish that," replied Esther, taking her mother's hand in both of hers. "I am glad that he—that my father brought me here. I seem to have been asleep and dreaming, and I would rather be awaked and live. I feel as if I had no right to that smooth, easy life I have left; and I shall be so glad to help you. You will let me help, will you not?"

"Not now; you must go to bed now. To-morrow you will need your strength. Good-night;" and Mary kissed her daughter and sent her away. And somehow she felt comforted—felt that she could never lose her altogether again.

And Esther was awake, keenly and terribly awake, to the pressure of the life in the midst of which she found herself. Seated once more on the bed beside her sleeping sister, she realised it keenly: the over-crowded dwelling, sunk in repose, holding so many lives, so many destinies; the possibilities of all those lives narrowed by the necessities of living, pressed upon by crushing circumstance; her father fighting with his fever; her sweet, wise mother at her patient watch—all these awakened dormant sympathies in Esther's soul, which she knew and felt would never sleep again, and which, full of pain and pity as they were, held at the core of them a joy and exultation—that which a poet of our day has called "the joy of eventful living."

Gifted with large and loving comprehension, the result of a clear intellect and a generous heart, a great sympathy with this struggling, working life, had laid hold of her. She began to wonder if she had any right to go back to her old life; but it could never be the same—she could not live any longer for enjoyment. Here Philip and his preaching came into her mind, and raised a crowd of solemn thoughts which took shape in prayer. She fell asleep listening for his singing—fell asleep in the silence.

It was very early morning when she sought her mother's room, ready for action, and fresh and vigorous from sleep in the pure air, which visits the city by night, if people will only keep their windows open to receive the heavenly visitor. And in that household there was, indeed, need for a fresh and vigorous spirit. Mary looked ten years older in the morning light, and gladly accepted Esther's offer to make tea for her; and having received directions where to find things, Esther went into the little kitchen, and made the necessary preparations with a celerity and neatness which would have astonished Sarah, who was still asleep in her improvised bed on the parlour sofa.

It was wonderful how smoothly things went that morning. Under Sarah's directions, who had to be roused at last, Esther put her hands to all the tasks of the household. The lads went off to work, the boys to school, and the twins to what they called their house of business. The day was well begun—the day that passes whether we are hale and happy, or sick and sorrowful, and whose progress is the same whether it brings life or death.

It brought another grave trouble under Esther's notice—a trouble which overshadows and comes side by side with every other among the poor—the want of money. Esther was not quite, perhaps, in the mental condition of the princess, who, when told that the people starved for want of bread, said, "Why don't they eat cakes?" but she had never known the want of money, and, therefore, had never known its value—that it was not only food, and clothing, and shelter, but heart's ease and freedom from crushing anxieties; that it was health, and healing, and life itself.

One or two little weekly bills had been presented that morning, and their bearers had been diplomatically dismissed unpaid. The task of dismissing them had been confided to Sarah; and Sarah was rapidly becoming confidential with this sister, who was so much older and grander—"so like a lady," indeed, and yet who looked upon her—Sarah—as an authority in domestic matters.

"I told the baker that father was ill, and mother would call and pay him in a few days. He will trust us," said the girl, proudly, "for we always pay."

"But why did you not pay him?" asked Esther, innocently.

"Oh! there will be many things wanted," answered Sarah, unconsciously using her mother's words, "and we must have ready money to get them. But I don't know what is to be done if father lies long; there will be nothing

then but what Willie, and Martin, and Emily, and Agnes can earn, and that won't do more than buy bread for so many."

"Please take this," said Esther, emptying her purse on the kitchen table; "I am sure mamma will give me more."

She used the familiar name unhesitatingly, and reflection did not check her trust in the source of supply which she had indicated.

Then the doctor paid his visit. "He's a strong man, and may get through it," he said, in reply to Mary's eager questioning.

Her own weariness had made her desponding, which added to the alarm always inspired by the state of unconsciousness. She was impressed with the idea of her husband's danger. But the doctor insisted on her taking rest.

"You must save your strength," he said, "for it will all be needed. His life will depend upon your care."

Then learning that Esther was a daughter of the house, he ordained that she should take her mother's place, for the next few hours at least.

Mary could not disregard the doctor's injunction. She lay down to rest.

"You must promise to wake me if he stirs; especially if he asks for me. He has not known me all the night. What if he should never know me again?"

And Esther promised, and took her mother's place in the sick-room.

Thus the day wore on. It was afternoon when a rap came to the door which startled the whole house. It was Harry West. Esther came to him straight from the darkened room where she had kept watch for the first time beside a sick-bed—her mother awakened by the noise, had already taken her place. He greeted her with a gaiety which jarred upon her, almost hurt her. As great a distance

had been placed between them in those last three days as it sometimes takes half a lifetime to place between characters of original diversity, inevitable as that moving apart always is.

He began by railing at Mrs. Wiggett. "I would have been here on Saturday, if the old lady had favoured me with your address," he said.

"She must have known it," said Esther, quietly, "for it was she and her husband who found out all about me."

"I know that," he replied (Harry always knew everything in the shape of gossip,) "and I'm determined to find out all about her. Indeed, I've found out already. I'm certain she has another husband out in Australia. Fancy that little shrew with two husbands. I should think they would hardly fight for which was to have her;" and he laughed merrily, and held out his hand to little Mary, who had been standing wide-eyed and with parted lips by Esther's side.

He was quite at his ease in the little parlour, as he was everywhere else. He observed everything, but then nothing impressed him. He was not struck with its poverty, nor with Esther's gravity of demeanour. At length he asked if he could see her father. He was approaching the object of his visit, but no one could have told that the object was one of tender moment. His gaiety had nothing of tenderness in it.

But if Esther had known his purpose, she could not have been more repressive in her manners; not that this would have helped her, however, if circumstances had not been on her side. "You cannot see him," she answered; "he is lying ill."

"What's the matter?" he asked, carelessly.

"Fever."

He shrank visibly. His courage, being physical, was for the things he could fight with. He dreaded disease.

She noticed the gesture. "I have just come from his room," she said, "and he is quite insensible."

"Then you ought to come away at once," he said, "as long as he cannot hinder you. Will you return with me?"

"No; I cannot," she answered. "You forget that he is my father, and that I am bound to respect his will—all the more," she added, "that he is unable to enforce it."

He was about to urge objections, but she broke off suddenly.

"You have not told me anything about mamma. Is she ill; is she unhappy? You must tell her that I cannot come back to her, cannot even see her, till he is better."

He assured her that she was just as usual—he had not thought she was particularly ill, or particularly unhappy; only she had expected Esther to return.

"Will you wait till I write to her?" she asked, feeling that no message carried through Harry's medium would carry her meaning in it. He assented, and she hastened to write; and in the meantime he went to the window and threw it more fully open, twice interrupting her to mention the best-known preventives of infection, thus showing, with his usual transparency, in what direction his mind was working.

Esther hastened to close her letter, and to send him away.

"You ought not to be longer here," she said. "Tell mamma I will write every day."

"And when he is better you will come back to us? He will be more reasonable then, perhaps."

"I will come and see mamma the hour in which I am free," she replied.

"It is such a bore," he said, holding out his hand—one of those plump, well-favoured hands that have no grip of fellowship in them—"it will spoil all our pleasure. Your

friends are all lamenting over you, Miss Constance quite disconsolate. There never was anything so hard, I should think. What a horrid place to live in, too! and everything in the country looking lovely. I say," he whispered on the threshold, "if he should die, you would be free."

She started with horror. "I would rather stay here for ever," she replied, with passion; and drawing back a step or two, she uttered a constrained and cold good-bye.





## CHAPTER XXII.

### PRUDENCE AND FLIRTATION.

**M**RS. WEST received the tidings of Esther, which Harry brought, without any outburst of sorrow, as one takes a long-expected loss. She had a presentiment that she had gone from her for ever; that even if she came back again it would not be her child who would come back, but another's. Herein lay her loss—the inevitable loss to which she must bow. And she did bow most meekly. She did not love Esther less, but only less selfishly. The wild tenacity of affection, like that which prompts the brute mother to guard her young, was gone, alas! only because the life that had nourished it was well-nigh exhausted.

She was drooping already like a flower that has had its prop rudely snatched from it.

Something to do for Esther roused her. She had begged her “mamma” to send some clothes to her, and Mrs. West would see to them herself. Leaving her maid in the dressing-room, to pack the boxes, she brought the things to her with her own hands, though more than once she had to sit down in the midst of her task, while her labouring breath came back to her.

Thus she saw to it that all Esther's dainty garments were put up for her—at least all that could possibly be of use to her at present—the rest she kept, laying them back in their places tenderly, as she had many a time taken out



and laid back other dainty little garments which had never yet been worn, and were lying, yellow with age, in a drawer by themselves.

Then she sat down and wrote a letter to her "darling," a letter full of touching humility, owning the wrong of which she had been guilty, and pleading not for love, but only for leave to love. Within the letter she placed a cheque for £50, and laying it in one of the boxes where it would be seen as soon as the box was opened, she sent the things off under the care of a faithful servant.

Day succeeded day of that week in July, each one lovelier than the last, though the constant sunshine was beginning to tell upon the verdure. And every day saw Harry West a visitor at Redhurst, for were they not all eager to hear tidings of Esther, who had written only once to Constance, while Mrs. West received a letter every morning? Constance would gladly have gone to her friend, but could not, in the face of her father's mild but reasonable objections, and the outcries of everyone else at her intended imprudence.

"People's hearts are eaten out of them with prudence," she said, rather bitterly, one day, complaining of this prevention. "It takes too great a share in the ordering of our lives and leaves no room for better things. I begin to hate it."

"There is no doubt that it becomes a vice in our days," said her listener, Benjamin Carrington; "especially in our class. We might also make it the great distinctive quality of it, and name the class below 'the imprudent class.'"

"And yet you admire these imprudent people," returned Constance, "and the sacrifices they make for what they think the interests of their class, the best and cleverest men among them giving up individual advantages for the good of others less able than themselves."

"Yes, and I admire the way in which the best of them

meet life—love and marry—and trust to their own right arms to provide for wives and little ones. They take life as it comes; we prudent people must have it all mapped out beforehand."

"Theirs is the manliest, the most Christian way," said Constance, warmly.

"I often think it is; but our lives are more exigent: we play for higher stakes."

"Our lives are more selfish; we want more luxuries and less work."

"Fathers want marriage settlements," he replied.

"That will be no difficulty as regards Esther," she said, gravely, concluding that he was thinking of his own position, which he had already explained to her; for he also had been a daily visitor at Redhurst since Esther's disappearance.

"Pardon me," he replied, "it would be the same as with any other. I myself would require more than many would demand. (It was like him, she thought, scrupulously delicate.) But it is not that—my mother is the difficulty. She objects to her birth and connections—perhaps most to the latter, and seeing the position I hold to her, her only son and only living relative, I cannot take any step at present. Happily she knows nothing. My secret is safe with you."

"Quite safe," murmured Constance.

"Time may soften my mother's objections."

"You must soften them," she answered bravely. "If you leave it to time, you may lose her. Mrs. West considers her nephew pledged to marry her."

"But you know you don't think she will marry him. The girl who would love him"—he spoke rather contemptuously—"could never love me." He broke off there. "As for that question of prudence, there are two sides to it, Constance, and I can't make up my mind whether the world

would gain or lose most by its becoming a preponderating quality."

"There are two sides to every question," she answered, in a tone in which the mockery veiled the tenderness, "and you never yet made up your mind on anything."

"Quite true, my Mentor. That's not my fault, but the fault of things in general. My mind is evenly balanced, as every man's mind ought to be, in fairness, and I can't help it, if equal weights are thrown into the scales."

Benjamin Carrington was the man who thinks without acting; who exists in states of feeling and attitudes of mind; and yet the mind was an intensely active one. Work, legal work, was his delight. In it the practical side of his character had developed itself, perhaps because in it he could labour with a result, which was determined within the limits of its definite boundaries. The outside world was too limitless to his keen imagination. Nothing had ever been denied to him, nothing had resisted him; and the very resistlessness of the medium in which he moved checked his impulses: for his nature was exacting in the extreme, both on its moral and affectional sides. He was beginning to feel the demands both of heart and spirit, for wider spheres of action, and yet he could not choose, for he must satisfy both at once. He might easily sink into discontent, or wither into cynicism.

No woman had ever satisfied him except Esther. She satisfied him to look at, with her ample and perfect proportion, and purity of outline and colouring. She satisfied him to talk to, for she never said silly things, from the supposed necessity of saying something, as even sensible and clever girls will do. She could keep an undisturbed, unconscious silence. There was a steady light of intellect in her, and a possibility of enthusiasm. He had been content to contemplate her, and had grown to love her—he would

have been content, probably, to go on thus, year after year, if nothing had happened. He wanted rousing, as Constance used to say, alive to his faults, but liking him all the more for them.

"That fool of a fellow is flirting desperately with Kate," he said, as Harry West came sauntering up the walk by her sister's side.

The four were left that afternoon in the garden by themselves, for Mr. Vaughan and Milly had gone into town together, to meet Mr. Walton, on business connected with the marriage; which was not to take place, however, till after a summer tour which was talked of.

Constance turned her eyes in their direction and blushed deeply. With more freedom of manner than her sister, Constance was far more sensitive. Harry was almost touching, with a rose which he had plucked, her sister's cheek, evidently matching it against her complexion, and expressing in his face and gesture—particularly the latter, for his face was not an expressive one—an admiration too marked, considering the position which he held with regard to Esther.

"It is only his absurd manner," said Constance. "Kate would not allow him to flirt with her, I am sure."

"I don't see how she could help it," he replied, measuring Harry most accurately. "You can't lay hold of him anywhere, and he has no self-restraint. His very goodness is against him."

It was quite true. The more Harry saw of Kate the more he liked her. He liked her luxuriance and her taste for luxury, and her love of pleasure, and he did not scruple to let her know that he did. In any other man it would have been desperate flirting. They had compared their tastes, and found that they agreed in almost every particular—a sign very nearly as dangerous as entire disagreement

—and Kate honestly liked and admired the Australian, and—must it be confessed?—felt a slight pang, when he finished up with declaring that he would do all the delightful things he had talked of when Esther and he were married.

There was no earnestness in his life. He had simplicity without earnestness, just as Benjamin Carrington had subtlety without it. They were alike in this, neither of them had felt the pressure of life. Both had been perfectly secure of all that makes existence safe, comfortable, pleasurable. Perhaps this was the secret of something of their lack in their different directions.

Be that as it may, Harry had this advantage, that his action in gratifying himself was entirely unimpeded by any consideration for others. He would have thought it perfectly right and proper to throw Esther over at this point and secure Kate, if he had been so minded, but his realism also seemed to show him that Esther was the best. And he meant to have the best, just as when he was gathering fruit for himself, he would always choose the most perfect of its kind. He acknowledged her superiority of intellect and temper. In several little scenes he had observed that Kate was not perfect in respect of the latter; that she was rather imperious and exacting, where Esther would have been quite the reverse. Her very coldness attracted him. But then if he could not get Esther—which was an alternative, however, that had never occurred to him—he would be quite contented with Kate, without in the least exalting her to the highest place in his thoughts. Harry was not at all given to ideals.

“His character is not coherent,” said Mr. Vaughan, when Constance was attempting to characterise him.

“How can you expect it to be, papa?” she answered; “he is not coherent himself.”

Under the gay humour with which Constance always

charmed her father, his quick eye discovered a growing sadness. On that same evening when the Vaughans, father and daughters, were left to themselves, Constance looked up suddenly and said, with an eagerness of which she was quite unconscious, "How soon can we go away, papa?"

"As soon as you can plume yourselves for flight," he answered, addressing all three; and then, turning to Constance, he added, "You seem to me to be drooping, child. I suppose you are feeling the unusual heat, in which Milly there luxuriates."

"Oh, do let us go at once," said Kate, suddenly, as if waking out of a fit of abstraction. "I can get ready in no time."

Constance thanked her sister in her heart. "Don't go against us, Milly. I know we shall see nothing half so pretty as home till we get back again; but that's all the more reason for getting away, that we may get back the sooner."

Then they all set to work to plan their summer tour, with a heap of maps and guide-books to assist them in choosing the route that would afford them most of what was new and beautiful. They had already been up the Rhine, and over the Bernese Oberland, and into Italy. They could not, therefore, make up their minds in one evening where to go next.

"I am so glad we are going!" said Constance, throwing open the lattice of her sister's room, and looking out into the starlight. She comprehended that Kate had made a conquest of self, but neither sister took the other into her confidence. This summer seemed to have changed them all.

"Are you not happy, Constance?" said Milly, half reproachfully. "I should wish never to go away at all."

"Happy! of course she is happy, the child has nothing to make her unhappy," said Kate, speaking as if out of her new experience, and giving Constance one of those bountiful embraces which made the youngest sister love the eldest most, in spite of their little jars.

With regard to these sisterly embraces, Constance had an apt simile: "Milly's feels like a light muslin scarf; but Kate wraps one up like a good Scotch plaid. I know which I like best on a cold day."

And Constance returned the embrace with equal warmth, and then went away and looked out at the window. After a little, she returned from her contemplations with a deep sigh, and said, "Our lives go so smoothly, whatever happens, that I wonder whether we could feel a great sorrow or a great joy if it came to us."

"What are you thinking of?" said Kate, not comprehending. Constance puzzled both of her sisters at times.

"I was thinking of Esther," she answered, and they were satisfied. It was Connie's way to take things grandly.





## CHAPTER XXIII.

### NIGHT WATCHES.

**T**HE sad routine of sickness once established, day after day passed over Martin Potter's household, bringing little or no change to its inmates. When the awful question of life or death has to be decided, all other matters become of little moment, and are settled without discussion—allowed, in fact, to settle themselves. The simplest food that would suffice was eaten by the youngest without a murmur. There was an utter absence of the usual friction of household life—a pause in which every one seemed to watch and listen.

Early on Tuesday Mr. Wiggett had presented himself, and asked leave to carry off the two younger children.

Johnny had departed, triumphantly holding the reins, the great bribe by which he had been induced to leave his mother's side ; while little Mary had been gained over by the idea that she was going to take charge of "the boy," whose delinquencies she regarded in the gravest light. Their mother, whose heart was at present centred on her husband, sent them away gladly, that the house might be quieter in their absence.

She was glad, too, before the week was over, to accept Philip's proffered aid. Even with Esther's help she felt her strength fail her ; it had been failing her for months before, though she had borne up with a feverish excitement, which made her seemingly independent of either food or rest.



Every evening, coming home from his work, between the hours of six and seven, Philip stopped and inquired how Martin was going on. The inquiry was generally made through the open parlour window, and it was also generally answered by Esther, established there in her new office of housekeeper. As he passed there he looked a very ordinary workman, no whit finer or cleaner than his fellows. The marks of the forge were on his garments and hands and face—the marks of a day spent amid smoke and sparks and grime. He looked smaller and more insignificant in his peculiar griminess—perhaps, because one expects a smith to be big and brawny. But though he did look small and insignificant, his employer would have testified that he had no better man in his workshop—that Philip Ward could beat his most stalwart fellows in the force and number of the blows he could ring out hour by hour. “The will is more than shape,” says one of our poets truly, and perhaps his vigorous will had developed the muscular power of his arms; but, by force of the spirit, it is certain that he could endure more labour, watching, and fasting than stronger men.

And one night, when the fever and delirium was at its height, he went away, and returned again in an hour, having changed his clothes and otherwise refreshed himself, and insisted on taking Mary’s place beside the sick man, promising faithfully to rouse her if the slightest change for the worse, or even if any return of consciousness took place. And before they left him for the night he had given abundant proof that, with his greater strength, his tenderness was equal to their own: and the strength was needed then as well as the tenderness.

Philip did not disturb any of them, though for many hours his task was a hard one—one to which he knew these poor women were unequal. All night he watched and prayed, watching for the soul as well as for the body of the

man who lay there, with a strange fervour, which burned in him through all these hours like a fire, at once feeding and consuming life. In the early summer morning, when Esther stole down, she started to see his face white as ashes. He had heard the movement in the silent house, and had come to the door of the chamber to meet whoever was stirring, and say that his watch was over.

"He is quiet now," he whispered; "and I must soon be going. Will you let your mother know?"

Esther did so, and Mary rose refreshed and thankful, while Esther would have prepared breakfast for their guest, but he would not suffer her—he had prepared his breakfast the night before.

"I always do it," he said, seeing Esther look astonished. "I have learned to like cold tea."

"But you have to work hard all day," said Esther, who had learnt the nature of his employment.

"I can work quite well on tea and bread," he answered. "Tell your mother I will take a turn again on Saturday, for then I can have as much rest as I need on Sunday;" and with these few words, but with a wonderfully sweet and gracious smile, he went away.

He would rest on Sunday! Then he had not the conventional notions on the Sabbath which she had heard attributed to very religious people. He did not care for anything but bread and tea. He was ready to risk his life to nurse a sick neighbour—to work all day and watch all night, and all this with a joy in the doing of it which was evident to Esther. More and more this man claimed her interest and drew her sympathy. She found that her brothers and sisters regarded him—so did the whole neighbourhood—as beyond the pale of sympathy and interest; as half-crazed, in fact. Her mother, gentler in her judgment, and grateful for his kindness, only thought him eccentric.

Esther said nothing, but felt that in his mind and conduct there was a harmony and order higher than any she had known, and she longed intensely to possess his secret. Instead of being crazed, she felt he had a nobler reason than others in his way of life; instead of being eccentric, that he was moving in a wider orbit. His life was like the movement of stately verse compared with halting prose.

On Saturday night, true to his word, he came, as he had done before. "I don't know what we should do without his help," Mary had said, when she left him to his watch once more, and with still stricter injunctions to awake her if needful, for the doctor had warned her that the crisis was at hand.

The wearied household slept, slept more soundly than usual, and awoke less early. It was the day on which the workers usually indulged in an hour or two more of sleep. As for Sarah, she was afflicted with a general sleepiness, as if she never had got, and never could get, enough of sleep. She slept as soon as she could at night, and as late as she could in the morning, fell asleep over the kitchen fire in the evening, and in the sunshine, if left in quiet, in the afternoon; and Esther, having found out that she could do things herself, indulged her more and more.

"I can't bear to see her look so wearied," she said to Mary. "I never feel like that."





**"As for Sarah, she was afflicted with a general sleepiness."**





## CHAPTER XXIV.

### PHILIP'S STORY.

**I**N this Sabbath morning Mary awoke to more hopeful tidings. With the morning, consciousness had dawned on Martin; and Philip, faithful to his promise, awoke Mary, and left her by her husband's side. For these last nights Mary had slept with Esther, so that both had risen together; and while Mary passed into her husband's room, and was left there alone with him, Esther descended with Philip into the little parlour. He had already given a whispered promise to stay with them and take some food before he went to rest. Mary had extorted the promise. He went and lay down on the sofa (Sarah had found a corner with the twins), and while Esther prepared the meal he fell asleep. The rest of the household slept on. She carried up a cup of tea to her mother, who could not leave her husband's side—her husband, who seemed restored to her by the speaking look in his eyes, though he seemed too much exhausted to utter more than a few words at a time. He could understand the love in touch and word of hers, and that was joy for the present. She could think of nothing else.

"You must wake him up," she said to Esther, when she told her that Philip was already asleep. "He will rest better at home;" and then she turned away to catch one of those precious murmurs.

Esther did not like to wake him. Lying there in the sunlight, his face looked worn and sad. As she stood hesitating she pronounced his name, half to herself. It was his Christian name—she had forgotten the other, if she had ever heard it. But soft as the sound was, he awoke, and met her eyes. She did not blush, though her eyes were swimming with tenderness. He simply smiled, and passed his hand over his brow, as one is apt to do when exhausted with thought.

“I fell asleep quickly,” he said.

“You are tired. How good you are,” she said.

He seemed embarrassed by her little speech, uttered on the impulse of the moment; but he laughed it off.

“I am only doing as I would be done by,” he said. “I hope some one more Christian than he thinks himself would do the same for me.”

They sat down together. To both the situation was new and strange; but everything during the past week had been new and strange to Esther. He felt it, however.

“I am not accustomed to be waited on, you see,” he said, anticipating some little attention, for which she begged pardon.

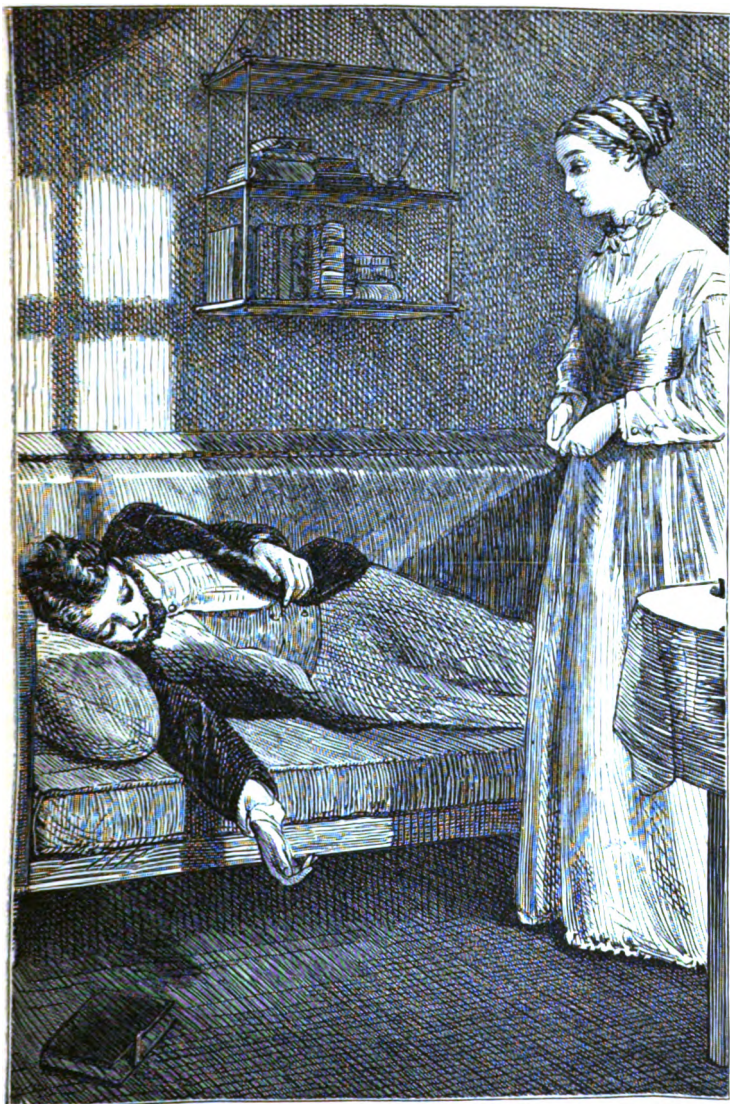
“Have you always lived alone?” she asked.

“I can scarcely remember the time when I did not. I have neither father nor mother, sister nor brother. I have a step-mother, if she is still living, but I can’t find her out, though I have tried. From her I ran away when I was quite a little chap, and picked up a living in the streets by doing odd jobs. I never begged, though I have been among beggars, and thieves, too,” he added.

“And then?”—she filled up the pause with unconscious eagerness.

“I used to frequent the lanes about Cheapside, and one day I held a gentleman’s horse for an hour at least—he had





"Lying there in the sunlight, his face looked worn and sad."



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The warm tea, too, stimulated  
and he went on freely and fluently

"Yes; I got the fever in an over  
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looked out once or twice to see that it was all right. When he came out, and had seated himself in the trap, he flung me a shilling, saying in a harsh enough tone, 'What are you idling about the streets for? Can't you get work?'

"I touched my cap, and said I would be glad to work at anything, and he seemed to believe me, for he said, 'Jump up here, then; and off we drove to his works.

"He was a great smith and engineer.

"'Want a boy?' he said to the foreman of the works, when we dismounted in the yard.

"'Very glad of a good'un, sir,' I remember the man said, grinning; and I determined to be a good one; which I found consisted chiefly in the knocking about I was able to stand. Boy and man, I have never been off work there since, except when I was in the hospital."

"Have you been in the hospital?" she asked, her eyes questioned further.

He was a man, and sympathy was sweet to him—as real sympathy cannot fail to be—and as rare as it was sweet. The warm tea, too, stimulated him after his night watch, and he went on freely and fluently.

"Yes; I got the fever in an over-crowded lodging where I had no business to be, only I was careless of myself then, and I was taken to the hospital. Nobody cared for me and I cared for nobody, but I didn't want to die, for all that. I had no more religion than a pagan: there are whole workshops in that condition. I think it's because the religion preached to them is just—'Save your own soul.' I know now how good many men are who preach in this strain, and how much more they mean than they are able to say, but they make us feel towards God as if he were a hard master, only that Christ has made good terms with him. Then the churches are crowded with such fine folk, that a working man feels put out when he goes for the first time, and he is

treated by the pew-openers as if he had no business there. The chaplain was very anxious to make me ready to die ; but I did not find what he said helping me to live. So I put it aside."

"Then how was it that you came to live as you do now?" she asked ; for this was what she wanted—to penetrate to the heart of his experience, that she might learn the secret of that fervent spirit which had so attracted her.

"The getting better had something to do with it. I never had such delicious sensations. I could not help thinking of God, because everything seemed so good. I had a little money—which is more than many a one has—coming out of hospital. It was summer, and I did not go to work for a week or two. I enjoyed myself as I had never done before, with a burst of innocent enjoyment. I went into the villages, and eat heartily all simple food, and drank milk, as the doctor recommended me, and read—for I had learned to read, and had always been a reader—out in the fields. I was so happy, that I went to church, and there for the first time, I heard the Word of life ; that to be a Christian was to have life, and to have it more abundantly—a life of the spirit, unselfish and self-sacrificing, the spirit of Christ himself."

"I am very selfish to keep you talking while you ought to be resting," she said. "But some day perhaps, you will tell me what the preacher taught you."

"You can read it for yourself," he said. "It is a religion as unlike the outward religion of some as anything can well be : you will find it all in the Sermon on the Mount. Thank God, it is not so far from the heart of many a church-goer. Now I shall go away and sleep, though I was never more awake in my life." And with another of his flashing smiles, which lit up his face as the sun does a grey limestone crag, he rose and left her.



## CHAPTER XXV.

### A DEFEATED LIFE.

**T**HE children were enjoying their holidays at Hurst, notwithstanding that they did not get on very well with the mistress of the establishment. She had been "rather cranky of late," her husband said to her, in mild remonstrance, whatever his phrase might mean. Though she had not opposed the coming of the children, she certainly had not approved of the step, and had muttered something to the effect that Timothy would always be running after Mary and her brats, now that he had found them.

They, the children, did not trouble her much, however. They were in the garden from morning till night, giving more or less active superintendence to the various operations; browning their little hands and faces in the sun, and eating enormous quantities of ripe fruit, at least the boy did, for little Mary was as dainty as a singing bird. She would follow Mr. Wiggett about, while her brother had attached himself to one of the lads about the place, and was gone a-field to the hay-carrying, to the imminent risk of life and limb. At first she was shy and silent, but ere long she was singing all her street tunes to new and original songs about the flowers, and bees, and butterflies, asking endless questions concerning them between her songs.

In the house, with the gardener's wife, she remained shy

and silent, as at first. She never came close to her, or asked her to do any little service for her. It was always to Mr. Wiggett she went, and he might be seen, with his big, brown hands, hopelessly knotting the string of a pinafore, or awkwardly tying a ribbon that had slipped over the elfin locks it bound and yet left free.

Mrs. Wiggett felt that the child held aloof from her, and so she held aloof from the child. But she often watched her at her play, by her husband's side, and felt a pang of jealousy when she saw how fond he was growing of the little girl. Now it was a pair of pretty painted cherries which he dangled before her and exchanged for a kiss; and now a full-blown rose, which disappointed her by falling to pieces the next moment, while the twin cherries went on blooming all day, and were only eaten the last thing at night, shared with Master Johnny, whose good things had all perished long ago.

It was often a wild, almost scared, face that looked out from that white-curtained rose-trellised window, into the sweet, bloomy, sunny garden, the disorder of the soul depicted on its every feature. Sarah Wiggett suddenly recognised that she was old, and hard, and haggard. She seemed to become repulsive, even to herself, and could not believe in her husband's simple and sincere affection. She could not believe in it, because she had done him wrong, and that wrong lay in the background of her life—a deep, black shadow, out of which a remorseless hand might some time or other be stretched to clutch her. The shadow had already stirred, and she knew that the hand was there. And her soul had cried out in its despair, facing the moving shadow, “Come near me, and I will die! I will die by my own hand, and escape into the outer darkness!” Poor soul, on whom the pains of hell had taken hold. It would have made Timothy's kind heart bleed to see her as she tore the picture of herself and her first husband in twain, and actually

crumpled the glass and the thin plate of metal in her hands. When she had done this, it calmed her, and she came down to the kitchen as if nothing had happened, and watched the fire consume the shattered fragments, never wincing at the cuts inflicted on her hands by the broken glass.

One afternoon Tim and the children had been driven in by a thunderstorm. They had been out in the fields, and had had to run for it, which furnished the children with a great excitement. On the way they passed Harry West, hastening in the direction of Redhurst, and he had stopped a moment to speak to Mary.

Mrs. Wiggett, from her window, saw them in the lane. When they reached the house she was there to meet them. With a fierce and restless glance she called out to her husband, "I wonder you could keep them children out. If the rain had come down as it has come this minute, they would have been drenched to the skin. And I wonder you would speak to that insolent fellow."

"How do you know he's an insolent fellow? I'm sure he never spoke to you in his life," said her husband, smiling, and shaking off her ill-temper as a duck does water from its wings.

And on this, muttering something which he could not hear, Mrs. Wiggett went away, and honest Timothy came to his old conclusion, that the mistress was a little cranky to-day. He was left alone with the children in the parlour, and he might not have found his task so easy as it was abroad in the fields, but that the roll of the thunder rather cowed Master John, so that he was glad to sit close to Mr. Wiggett's feet, as his sister had already done. Mary was evidently pursuing some train of thought. At last, looking up in Mr. Wiggett's face, she broke silence with the question, "Does she like her other husband more than you?"

Her listener was entirely at fault.

"Who's she?" he asked, with a puzzled smile.

"Mrs. Wiggett," lisped Mary.

"I didn't know she had another husband."

"Oh, but she has; and I think she must like him best," answered the child; the train of thought she had been pursuing was, whether Mrs. Wiggett ever went to live with her other husband, for she wished she would go now, she looked so cross.

"Ha! ha!" laughed Timothy Wiggett, loudly; "what put such a thing into your little head?"

"The gentleman with the gold chain said it," answered Mary.

"You must never say it again," said Mr. Wiggett, looking suddenly very serious; and he begun pondering his wife's looks and words with grave uneasiness. "I wonder if this young fellow knows anything about Ned Brown," he thought; "and if he has spoken to her, why has she not told me?"

Thus little Mary had unconsciously planted, by her words—those winged seeds of good or ill—a great and dismal doubt in the heart of her benefactor.

From that day Timothy Wiggett began to watch his wife, till he became convinced in his own mind that something was wrong with her; but there was more delicacy within that broad-faced ruddy-brown man than there is under many a fair skin and faultless form, and he said nothing to force her confidence. If she could only have spoken to him of the terrible possibility—now turned probability—which threatened their peace, she would have been safe—safe, not from the thing itself, but from the terrors of her own conscience; safe in the generous nature of the man she had married, who would have sheltered her, at any cost, from the consequences of her fault, if she had flung herself on his mercy; but she could not. "Blessed are the merciful:

for they shall obtain mercy." The unmerciful cannot even seek it, seeing that they have no faith in its existence.

Meantime, Sunday came round again, the second Sunday since the children had been with the Wiggetts, and then, to Mrs. Wiggett's intense relief, they were recalled. It was Philip who came for them—came on foot, and with great drops beaded on his brow; but Timothy Wiggett caused his pony to be put into the wagonette in haste, and drove them to the station; and neither of them spoke a word to the children concerning the meaning of their sudden recall; but they were peculiarly tender to them all the way, with a solemn tenderness, and even Mrs. Wiggett had a shade of the same in her last farewell, after the few whispered words that had passed between her husband and the stranger had been communicated to her.

On the previous Sunday Martin Potter's fever had reached its low stage. The symptoms of excitement had passed away, and a lucid interval had occurred, in which Mary had comforted her husband, and had been comforted concerning him. Her terrible fear that he would never know her again was taken away, the anguish of parting in unkindness was removed. And there was hope, too, that the awful separation, inevitable on one side or other, was to be indefinitely postponed. But at the end of the second week the doctor saw that the disease was rapidly approaching a fatal termination, and thought it his duty to warn Mary of the truth. He did it gently as well as faithfully, prepared for her burst of agony; for who is ever willing to give up hope? "He may become sensible for a while before death," he said: and that was all the comfort he could bestow.

And Mary could not bear that the youngest of her children should be absent when the last farewells were spoken; that they should miss their father's last looks, if nothing more, or that he should miss them from his side.



So Philip, ever ready to give the help that was most desired, had given up his day to bring them back.

Martin Potter lay prostrate and insensible, with extended arms, and with the peculiar, indescribable look of anguish on his countenance which marks the terrible disorder. A film seemed spread over his eyes, which looked as though they saw not, and from time to time a low muttering escaped his lips, which Mary vainly tried to shape into articulate words. From time to time she administered wine and the cordials prescribed in the last stage of the fever. There was no more to be done. Every window, and every door, too, was set open to catch the slightest breeze, but the very breath of heaven seemed to have departed. So passed the weary afternoon.

Esther received the children from Philip's hands, and remained with them in the parlour, waiting for a summons to their father's death-bed. There was no need to keep them quiet; a great awe had fallen upon them—a fear of the shadow that sat upon the faces of their elder brothers and sisters. They crept close to one another, settling at last beside Esther, who encouraged them to lean upon her; and at last little Johnny fell asleep, and was lifted into the corner of the sofa. At length the cooler hours arrived. The grateful shadows fell—though they were only the shadows of houses. A light breeze swept through the house. They were called.

Martin had opened his eyes from a brief slumber, and looked at Mary—a long, unclouded, but wistful look. And Mary had knelt down, and seized the hands, growing awfully chill to the touch, and covered them with kisses, crying, "Oh, my husband! my love! my love!"

It needed no other words, if it needed even these, in the tone in which they were uttered, to tell Martin Potter that the end had come. He could only speak a few words at a time, and then in a whisper.

"I'm done for, Mary," were his first simple words, but full of awful pathos, the acknowledgment of a defeated life.

"Christ have mercy upon us!" moaned Mary on her knees.

"Amen," whispered the dying man.

"The children," he murmured, after a pause.

Mary had forgotten them in an agony of silent prayer. She rose, and went softly to the landing, and called them.

"Children."

They sent the little ones first; last of all came Esther, the first-born.

His wife gave him some wine, and Martin Potter roused himself. His children passed him, one by one, and then gathered in a group at the foot of the bed. Mary put his hand on the heads of the little ones, and bade them kiss him, but he said nothing. The elder ones knelt and kissed his hand, and one and all turned away weeping. Then Esther came forward and knelt, and he roused himself yet more. He spoke still in a whisper. "Forgive me, my girl, and be good to your mother," were the words caught by Mary and Esther alone; and she, too, weeping, said, "I will."

It seemed to content him more than anything, and Esther remained by the bedside.

After another pause of exhaustion, "Take them away," he murmured.

Mary thought it was the children, and signed for them to leave the room. But he shook his head. She had misunderstood. "To another country," he explained.

He sank back heavily, still murmuring words which they strove to catch, but in vain. Then there was a long silence, broken only by stifled sobs, and Martin Potter lay dead in the midst of his days.



## CHAPTER XXVI.

### A CONSOLER.

**M**ARY POTTER, with all her vigour, and all her breadth of character, was a woman who needed support; who fell when her support was taken away. Her luxuriant affections could not sustain themselves. When her husband died, the stem round which those had clustered was broken, and for a time it seemed as if they had perished. She was like a vine, heavy with fruitage, when the prop is violently rent from it, and which seems laid in ruins on the ground. Neglecting everything, hardly conscious indeed, she would lie in a heap by the side of that prostrate form which had now put on all the majesty of death, and looked kingly in its white repose. There were moments in which, if the door of death, at which she lay, had opened to receive her, she would wilfully have passed beyond recall, so intense was her longing for him who had already gone. The harshness was all forgotten to him—remembered only as something from without that had come between them, and had been a mutual trouble. “It would all have come right in the end,” she murmured, “if he had only lived.”

If her little ones had been under the immediate pressure of want or suffering, Mary might not have sunk under her sorrow, but the money sent by Mrs. West, and placed by Esther at her mother's disposal, removed any immediate pressure; and it is not seldom that the removal of smaller

cares exposes the spirit to the full weight of a crushing sorrow. When Esther, suffering at the sight of her mother's sufferings, felt herself powerless to console, it was to Philip that she looked for help; to Philip, who had given up his time to make the funeral arrangements, to do all, in short, that a near male relative would have done; to Philip, who when the time of trouble was over, would fall back upon his routine of labour and of preaching, and be only a neighbour.

And Philip—who had been placed in similar circumstances, who had drawn near to people in their time of trial, and acted the part of son or brother, without reward, without the reward of that exclusive affection which men covet—knew it would be so. But this time he felt he cared to be something more; to awaken more interest than a neighbourly one in this circle—the sacred household circle from which he had been all his life shut out.

Mary could not have had a wiser or tenderer comforter than he was. He did not give utterance to the terrible things which good people sometimes mistake for Christian consolation, and which, in Mary's case, would have made every word a rankling wound; he did not give utterance to them, for he knew them not. He left the future shrouded in its mystery. He only made her willing to trust in the mercy of the heavenly Father. It is strange how the most dismal of beliefs vanish at the touch of love. Martin was not a religious man; had not passed through anything that could be called a death-bed repentance; yet—though Mary if questioned concerning repentance and salvation in general, would have answered in the sternest language of the most rigid formula,—she was quite willing to accept for her husband the boundless hope which Philip set before her.

Philip made this faith of the heart the basis of his teaching. The great argument which preachers use

against postponing religion—namely, that there may be no time like the present; that the end may come before we are aware, before we have time to make an escape from the endless consequences—he put aside as utterly unworthy. He would have men become religious, because they wished to live religious, the highest possible life; not because they wished to die the religious, or safest possible death. “Though we know enough of the consequences of sin here to tremble for them hereafter,” he said, “it is the hell upon earth that we are most concerned with at present.”

And this creed of his did not sit loose and easy upon him. He had never read the lives of the ascetic saints, but he lived the life of an ascetic in the middle of London, denying himself all ease, pleasure, comfort, joy. No, not joy. “I do not believe in comfort,” he said to Esther; “but I do believe in joy. If I were rich, I should delight, not in giving little gifts, but in lifting up the hearts of weary men and women with great unexpected good things, so that they might be raised up for ever after into a new world of thankfulness and faith and joy.” He did not tell her that as far as his means went he did this; perhaps supporting for weeks a widow and her children, or lifting some wretched being out of the depths, and setting her or him in safety in a clean place, so that he or she could never thereafter doubt that there was a deliverer. “Christianity,” he explained to her, “is at once the easiest and the hardest of all religions—it is the religion of doing good. There is a lord here in London who gives some hundreds a year, I think, to his cook, to find him a new flavour. Poor fellow! if he only knew the taste of doing good, he would be content to live on bread and water ever after.”

Some unknown possibility of a higher and diviner life had haunted Esther's heart, as it haunts the hearts of most of us in our youth, at least; and she seemed to herself never

to have understood it before, never to have known that it meant the daily, hourly choice of the best and the noblest, and that the choice of anything lower caused the haunting glory to grow obscure and dim. There are times in which this inner light shines, as it were, along some particular path of life, blinding the wayfarer to its ruggedness; but mostly it shines in the distance, not as a light unto the feet and a lamp unto the path, with no guiding ray to tell us how the distance must be traversed. Often it is called by the shadowy name of poetry or romance, and one sometimes hears the pathetic disclaimer of one whose soul is sunk in petty cares, "I don't like poetry, and that kind of romantic rubbish." "Better the most romantic folly, so long as it is real, and not simulated, than your worldly wisdom," one is tempted to answer. If you had cared for poetry, you would never have selected the lot you have chosen. It might have been harder, it is true, but it would have been higher, and that glory need not have passed away so utterly from the earth. The time was drawing near when a great choice would lie before Esther, in which the path of right would not be quite easy to discern, for the hardest task is not always necessarily the highest.

The Vaughans were gone. They had hastened their preparations, and the news of Martin Potter's death reached them on the morning of their departure. But what was he to them?—only a figure in the registrar-general's statistics of mortality. Good, generous Constance even ventured to think it was a good thing, for Esther's sake, that he was gone, and that everything would right itself for her friend. She did not say this to her, of course; but she did not think there was much need for consolation, and her warm-hearted farewell letter did not, therefore, contain much condolence. It did not, however, jar upon Esther, for its tone was sad. The others sent their affectionate re-

gards, and hoped to see her on their return. Then they went off on their pleasant tour. There were other friends and neighbours, the Carringtons, for instance, who made no sign, and what she might do or suffer in their absence made very little difference : so thought Esther. But what would she have had ? We must all stand alone in the great crises of our history. Friends and neighbours are put far from us. It is only given to love, and to that not always, to share the burden of the spirit in temptation and trial.

At the last moment, Harry West would fain have gone away with the Vaughans. He called their going "a horrid cut up," and quite resented the manner in which his summer enjoyment was being spoiled. He received no encouragement, however, and Mrs. West held him back with a kind of despair, from making the proposal to accompany them, at which he had hinted. Esther had written to Mrs. West daily, and was very earnest in her entreaties that Harry should not come near the house in Sutton's Alley—a prohibition for which he was not sorry.

But now that Martin Potter was dead and buried, and the house no doubt properly disinfected—he wrote to Esther, suggesting the proper fluid—there was no reason—he, Harry West, having nothing particular to do—why he should not go and see Esther, and get matters settled for her return. But Mrs. West had seen enough of Harry to know that no delicate negotiation could be entrusted to his hands, and she felt that it was a delicate matter to ask Mary Potter once more to part with her child. She proposed to Harry to leave "The Cedars" for the present, and go into town, and he was quite delighted at the proposal. He had quite exhausted the country round, and was eager for a change. In fact, he never cared for the same place twice. He had not in his nature that depth which alone makes the simplest things exhaustless.

So Harry came into town and procured a house in one of the streets of Belgrave Square, as near to Esther as Mrs. West could wish, and the removal was to be made without loss of time. "The Cedars" was to be shut up, to the regret of the village in general (for Mrs. West had never gone to foreign parts, like some of her neighbours), but to the relief of one particular person in it. Mrs. Wiggett breathed freely once more.







## CHAPTER XXVII.

### ESTHER'S CHOICE.

**D**URING the week or so that Harry was in search of a house in Belgravia, he made a point of calling every day in Sutton's Alley. The Potter family had fallen into its accustomed routine, all but Mary, who was slowly rising from the heavy blow. The four elder children were at work as usual, and it was generally Esther and the little ones alone who received him. Harry West was at once a great favourite with the children. Folks are fond of crediting the small people with an almost supernatural insight into character, while they, in reality, are only led by outward appearance, undistracted, however, by more worldly motives. They always prefer the showiest and best-dressed person in a company, and Harry's thick gold chain had a great effect upon both Mary and Johnny, the latter insisting upon testing how severe a strain of tugging it would bear. And then Harry brought them presents at every visit. And he asked Esther, in passing, as it were, if there was anything she would like, and Esther smiled in perfect simplicity and good faith, and answered, "Nothing."

This was as far as Harry dared go at present. He had been warned by Mrs. West that he must not be too precipitate, that Esther would feel the indelicacy of any immediate offer, with her father newly dead : for Harry on his first



**"Harry's gold chain had a great effect."**



visit to town had bought a ring of turquoise and diamond, as a present for Esther, which Mrs. West had taken into her own keeping till a more convenient season.

When he found the house near Belgrave Square, he came hurrying to Esther, and asked her to accompany him at once to inspect it: Mrs. West was quite unequal to the fatigue, and was waiting with anxiety the time when she would be able to have her darling at her side once more. "You women know so much better what is wanted about a house," said Harry, very naturally. So Esther donned her simple mourning bonnet—her sisters had made it with their own—and went.

As they passed out into the street together, they met Philip coming home. Esther had not seen him for several days. He had already withdrawn himself somewhat. In his hands he carried one or two small paper parcels, suspiciously like recent purchases from the grocer's shop. Esther gave a slight start forward as if to speak, but he did not notice it; he was rapidly scanning the face and figure of Harry West, and having done so, he passed on with a stammering "Good evening."

"Who's that?" said Harry, as he heard the voice, taking his eyes from Esther's face, into which he had been looking eagerly as he rattled on, and bestowing a glance upon the small dingy figure.

"A friend," she answered; and her face, which was already several degrees paler for her town life, took an unusual glow.

Harry laughed his careless laugh.

"You do not know how good he has been," she said, and proceeded to recount his kindness.

"Couldn't you give him something—some money, I mean?" he added, seeing Esther's eyes widen. "I dare say he would not be offended. He looks miserably poor."

"Oh no, you don't understand him," said Esther, hastily, as if in alarm, and she was glad that her companion took no more notice, but went on to something else.

The house was handsome and very fairly furnished. Esther had no fault to find with it. Harry had a hundred. This was inconvenient, and that was inelegant, and the other thing was shabby. Did not Esther think so? She could not help laughing at his new knowledge of upholstery. Nor was he slow to reveal the source of it: Kate Vaughan had been his instructress.

"There's nothing like having a house in town," he said, repeating her very words, "it's convenient for everything; and even if you want to go and see the world, it's better to have a base of operations to fall back upon. Don't you think so?"

"I should think so," said Esther, smiling, "though my mind has not been much exercised on the subject."

"Perhaps it would be better to see everything at once, before settling down—Paris, Rome, Venice, Switzerland. I mean to have a peep at them all. What a pity, now, that we could not have gone with the Vaughans, or agreed to meet them somewhere," he went on.

What did he mean by *we*? But Harry was inexplicable, and she let it pass, but half interested in his strain of talk.

"After all, I do not know about a house in town," he rattled on, with that curious cleverness which characterised him. "It costs a great deal, I suppose, and money has an end, and ought to be made the most of. I question whether one does not get more pleasure out of simpler modes of living, sufficiently varied. But you shall decide all that. This will do for us in the meantime, till everything is put right for you. We must make it all smooth for your mother, you know. Settle so much a year on her, that would be the best way."

There was no misunderstanding him now—no misunderstanding his look and tone of easy appropriation. He was planning this life of ease and pleasure for her; a life in which everything was to be made smooth, and as much as possible pleasant for everybody, after it had been made perfectly so to themselves. And how rebuke him, looking so kind, pleasant, and eager, and taking her consent for granted.

"You must not count on me at all," she said, hastily; "I can decide nothing at present."

Another man would have taken alarm at the utter withdrawal in Esther's tone; but it was lost on Harry.

"I must go *home* now," she continued, with an emphasis on the word home, "and you will let me know when 'mamma' comes up, and I will be here to meet her. Of course she will send servants before she comes herself."

The house was unoccupied, so there was no obstacle, and it was settled, as Harry would fain have settled every question of the universe, that they should enter it at once. Then he walked home with Esther to the very door of her mother's house, lingering there to appeal to her once more on the momentous question, as to whether he ought to spend an interval of time in doing London, whose season was on the wane, or take a run through the Lake District, or Scotland.

"I wish you would not appeal to me, Harry," she said, very gravely; "we are so different. I could not lead your kind of life."

"Oh, but I can lead any kind of life, that's the beauty of it," he replied, "from, roughing it in the bush to swelling it in Belgravia."

It was quite hopeless; Harry would never understand, unless certain definite words were said, which could not be said till certain other definite words had preceded them

on his part. And so with a mutual "Good-night," they parted.

And in the little court two pairs of eyes had witnessed the lingering parting. Philip, from his bare, lonely little room, with the remains of his spare, solitary meal still before him, saw it, and turned away with a deeper sense of loneliness than he had ever felt before; and Mary, who from the opposite side had been watching wistfully for her daughter's return, looked, and also turned away and hid her face in her hands.

Her eyes were still wet when she met Esther in the parlour, but it was with a hopeful gleam, like that of the clearing shower—not with the dull, persistent weeping, in which she had indulged for days.

It was she who spoke first, after Esther had once more settled herself beside her. "I have been thinking of the future," she said. "I have been wrong to lose so much time already. I ought to get my little scholars together again, or they will be scattered elsewhere. I must try to increase my school. I know nothing else I can turn to."

It seemed a sudden rousing from the apathy of her sorrow, but Esther was glad to notice it, and said, hopefully, "I will write round to all the parents at once."

"I do not see what else I can do," Mary repeated; "and yet I shall earn but a very little after paying the rent. The boys must be taken from school and sent to run errands; but it is poor Sarah who will suffer most. I cannot afford to keep her. She must go away into service."

Esther had been too self-absorbed by what had passed, to take in, in a moment, the full meaning of her mother's words, but it flashed upon her with the pause which followed. The practical difficulties of life confronted her here. The absolute struggle for existence, which meant the sacrifice of education, of affection, of strength and health and

life, for Mary had reserved a heavy burden for her own shoulders.

Esther was full of joyous life. How did she feel to be thus confronted? Her temperament was poetic—not the small, irritable, fanciful poetic—but the large, calm, imaginative order. What she felt was a kind of joy, a glow like what a person in vigorous health feels in facing a keen, clear frost, or a bracing north-west wind.

“You must have a much larger school,” she said, eagerly. “There is plenty of materials at hand. I never saw so many children—they seem to swarm out at every door, and they never seem to go to school. We must write a circular, saying that you have got an assistant who can teach music, etc. It is quite true, you know,” she added, as her mother shook her head.

“But where are we to find room?”

“We could take a larger house could we not?”

“And where is the money to come from?” said her mother, almost amused at the way in which Esther disposed of difficulties.

It was not so easy as it seemed at first, she allowed.

“And you will be going away soon,” continued her mother.

“Mother, I will not leave you any more. She has been very good to me, but you are my own mother.”

It was the first time they had touched on the subject, tacitly laid aside during the troubles of the past weeks.

Mary smiled a wistful smile. “Going away to a home of your own, I mean,” she said.

It was plain of whom she was thinking.

“You must not think so,” cried Esther, almost reproachfully.

“What am I to think? He has been here every day lately. I thought you had already accepted him.”

“Then he must not come here again. He has not even



asked me to accept him ;” and she explained how matters stood between them.

“ But he looks so bright, and kind, and good,” said Mary, perversely pleading for what she would have considered somewhat of the nature of a trial if it had been presented to her in the shape of a foregone conclusion ; “ and,” she added, though with hesitation, “ he is rich, I suppose ? ”

“ Yes, he is rich,” said Esther, slowly ; “ but, mother, I would rather be poor. I have made my choice. If I could be rich and happy, I might choose that,” she added, with a smile ; “ but it is better to be poor and happy than rich and miserable. I should be miserable with him ; I shall be happy with you.”

“ You do not know what poverty is,” said Mary, who feared such a decision for her daughter as she would not have feared it for herself. Do not make up your mind so quickly. I tremble to think of all you are giving up.”

“ I am not giving up anything I love, except” (she hesitated, for the word *mamma*, familiar from childhood, was on her lips ; but she gave utterance to the formal name instead) ; “ and you will never ask me to give her up altogether,” she continued ; “ indeed you would love her if you knew all she has suffered.”

“ I try to forgive all she has made me suffer, the trouble she brought your father and me,” said Mary, with a sob. “ But do not choose rashly between us. I would rather never see you again, than have to think that I had spoilt your life.”

Once more in her own little room, which Mary had now contrived to give up to her sole use, Esther meditated long and deeply on the choice she had made ; not with the view of altering it, however, but to strengthen her own conviction that it was the right one. For Harry’s painted paradise of ease and delight, she did not spare a single sigh. For

the one deep affection which had twined itself with all her past, her heart bled deeply. It seemed a hard and cruel decision, but she had been placed in one of those hard and cruel positions in which there must be suffering on one side or other. In those past weeks there had grown up in her heart a luxuriant growth of family affection. There was not one of her brothers and sisters whose fate could ever be a thing of little moment to her again. Nature took a sort of vengeance upon her, and exacted the arrears of that love and service which the ties of blood demand. She could not leave her wronged and suffering mother, for whom she felt—besides the natural love—a profound spiritual sympathy; could not forsake her kindred in their poverty to live in riches and ease among strangers in blood, among whom, she felt, they would be more or less despised. She might remain with them, and yet not break with her past. She could not go back to her old life without in a great measure renouncing them. And as she thought out the problem thus, she found herself wondering if Philip would have had any hesitation in advising her to make this choice. It was not strange that she should feel the influence of the highest standard of living that had ever come before her, and proceed to try herself and others by it.

There remained one great trial to be got over before Esther's choice was complete in fact—namely, the announcement of her resolution to Mrs. West.

In the house which Harry had taken, whither the servants had already migrated, and where she was still looked upon as the young mistress, Esther awaited the coming of the not too wise, but loving woman, whom she had known only as a mother.

It was a sad meeting for both, but most sad for the frail and gentle Mrs. West, who was only too ready to feel like a condemned culprit, and who appeared, if possible, frailer

than ever. But she bore it better than Esther expected; a hope still remained to her that she might make amends for the harm she had wrought.

"It is right—it is just," she murmured. "And you say that she forgives me? And you will come and see me, darling, every day," she continued, with a look of entreaty, "for I may not have many to live. But you may be nearer to me before I die," she added, looking tenderly in the girl's face, the light fading from her own as she read what was written there.

Esther understood. "I cannot bear to disappoint you," she said, humbly; "but it cannot be. If Harry wishes it, you must tell him that it cannot be; you must tell him never to see me again. I do not think he will care—that is, very much. I hope not; but indeed I cannot marry him."

"He does wish it," said Mrs. West, eagerly. "He will be sadly disappointed. He has gone so far as to buy you an engagement ring."

"But you know he will not break his heart, mamma," Esther could not help saying; and Mrs. West could not contradict her.

"I will not urge you," she replied, "if you feel that you cannot see him again. I will tell him all you say."

"It will be easier for him, though it is hard for you," said Esther. "I have no right to allow him to ask when I mean to refuse."

And Mrs. West acquiesced mournfully but entirely. It was strange how easy it was to her to acquiesce, and how difficult it had seemed.

"Am I ceasing to feel before I cease to live?" she asked herself.



## CHAPTER XXVIII.

### SETTLED.

**A**FTER spending several evenings in discussing the important question of "Where shall we go?" the Vaughans had at last decided in favour of a tour among the Flemish towns. It had often been spoken of before, but always postponed for some more exciting campaign; yet Mr. Vaughan had long looked forward to visiting those quaint old cities, thronged with histories of industry, art, and war.

For once, the choice of the little party had not been unanimous. Kate, who seemed to have been seized with the spirit of unrest, wanted to get away as far and as fast as possible; while Milly wished to remain as near home as she could: and as Kate had no reason—at least, no ostensible reason for desiring to rush away, and Milly had a very good one for desiring to be near at hand, the latter for once carried the day. She had gained over Constance by confiding to her that the grandest scenery would be lost upon her in Herbert's absence, and that the chief charm of any place to which she might be taken would consist in the frequency and regularity of its posts.

So they had started, by Ostend, for Bruges, Ghent, and Antwerp; not to rush through them day by day, but to linger lovingly—at least, that was in Mr. Vaughan's programme—under the shadows of the great cathedrals,

among the narrow streets with their many-gabled houses, and over the treasures of their galleries and churches.

But somehow or other this tour was not so pleasant as those that had gone before. The change was felt by all, and attributed by each to a different cause. Mr. Vaughan regretted that he had gratified his own taste in the matter, and carried his party into close, sultry towns, when they might have been breathing the exhilarating mountain air. Kate was always crying, "Come away." Her lack of interest was apparent; she who had formerly been the most eager to see everything that was to be seen, and learn everything that was to be learned, seemed to count it all a weariness. She, too, thought that it would have been otherwise if they had gone elsewhere, unconscious that the change was in herself, and that if she had visited the scenes that had formerly delighted her, they would have delighted her no more than these. She did not know, for she was not one of those who look within, that she was like a child, in view of a new pleasure, who flings all its cherished toys aside as worthless until it is attained.

One little year had changed them all—or rather, it had made apparent the long, silent workings of inward change. Some tokens of the change Mr. Vaughan could see, and they saddened him in spite of himself. From Milly, the sweet, unabso:bed girlishness had departed. Her heart was no longer free. Besides, she had a new interest in shop-windows and decorations, and, alas for Mr. Vaughan, seemed to prefer such trivial matters to the great works of art, before which he stood enraptured.

As for Constance, who had usually catered for the whole company in respect of mirth and amusement, she kept to her rôle; but sometimes she did her part a little too laboriously, and failed to catch the sympathy of the others, as one fails who is acting instead of simply feeling and expressing the mood of the moment.

They had reached Antwerp, where they intended to remain the greater part of the week, and had taken up their quarters in the Hotel St. Antoine. It was late in the evening when they arrived, and after a slight refreshment in the saloon, they had retired for the night. They retired early as a rule, and were stirring again proportionately soon on the morrow, knowing that there is no time like early morning for seeing these old towns in all their impressive beauty, or for visiting their great churches.

Constance was stirring first. She rose, and looked out of her window into the paved court surrounded by the hotel buildings. The soft, pure light fell upon the white walls. A number of doves were on the opposite roof, and from time to time they alighted in the spacious, empty courtyard, set round with tubs of evergreens. It was only six; but Constance dressed quickly, and went out without waking the others. She knew that the great cathedral would be open early, and thither she was hastening to have an hour to herself, for she knew that her father and the others would follow her, as she had declared her intention the night before.

A good many people were abroad for such an early hour. As she crossed the market-place, and passed down the narrow streets which cluster at the foot of the great cathedral, women, in their black cloth cloaks and hoods, carrying baskets on their arms, bent their steps, like herself, to its gates, and, depositing their baskets in the porch, went in to worship. After wandering through the aisles, that stretch on either side like a forest of pillars, she seated herself in the nave, and remained there during the service. As she anticipated, her father had followed, but she had not noticed when he came in, nor did she notice him though he sat nearly opposite, engaged in reading the new expression of his daughter's fate.

"I have hardly done her justice," he thought; "she does not take life so lightly as I imagined she did. I thought her wanting in depth because she sparkled on the surface. Her face is almost too grave and sad. How difficult it is to understand one's daughters."

When she rose from her seat he joined her, and they bargained for a look at the great pictures. Long after every one else had left the cathedral, father and daughter stood gazing on the face of the crucified Christ. It was not till they were outside the walls again that either ventured a remark, and then they walked most of the way in silence.

"I never could understand the rank which Rubens takes as a painter till now," said Constance. "I feel as if I could look for ever on that face; that having once seen it, I shall see it always, only with a kind of thirst to see it with my eyes again to make the image of it clearer in my memory."

"We shall go again after breakfast with Kate and Milly," said her father, gratified by her enthusiasm: and with that they entered the arched gateway of the hotel.

A familiar voice was making inquiries of the porter, and receiving, it was evident, no very satisfactory replies.

It was Harry West. A fact which Constance perceived in a moment, while her father was advancing for a confirmatory view. With a quick gesture she drew him within the opposite doorway, and up a short flight of stairs. "He has not seen us," she whispered, with a little gasp.

Mr. Vaughan was decidedly slow. He simply looked astonished at his daughter's eagerness—astonished and questioning.

"That dreadful creature has come after us, papa," said Constance, with a half-comical perplexity. "Do you think it is possible to escape from him?"

It—the truth, that Harry had come after Kate—began to

dawn upon Mr. Vaughan, and his face reflected the expression of his daughter's.

"But I don't see the necessity for escaping," he said. "We can keep him at a distance, surely."

"Oh no; that's just what you can't do," replied Constance. "I am really vexed, papa."

The voice was heard drawing nearer. Was he going to take up his abode in the hotel? Constance dragged her father up another flight of steps, and along a passage which crossed the archway, into his own room. There they held a private consultation, in which Constance expressed her conviction that Kate was anxious to avoid Harry, and in which they concluded to keep their knowledge of his arrival to themselves in the meantime. If he had really come to stay there, of course it would be impossible to escape, as they took all their meals, according to custom, in the public room.

Leaving her father to himself, Constance next went off in search of her sisters. Their rooms were three narrow slips of apartments, next door to each other, and all looking into the paved court. First she peeped in upon Milly, who looked up from her letter, sweet and serene as usual. She was writing to Herbert. It passed her sister's comprehension how she found so much to say when she did so little. Constance gave her a good-morning kiss, and left her to her meditations. Then she looked into Kate's room, but that was empty, and, with a feeling of almost apprehension which she could not account for, she hastened back to Milly.

"I am sorry to disturb you again," she said, as her sister looked up once more from her task, "but I want to know where Kate is."

"She went out to meet you," said Milly, "for she asked me to go with her, but I wanted to finish my letter first."



She has missed you, and gone on to the cathedral. Is anything the matter?" she added, catching an expression of annoyance on Constance's face.

"I am awfully hungry," said Constance, "and I will go and order breakfast. Come down as soon as you can, and bring papa with you. I dare say his letter will be finished before yours."

In the meantime Harry and Kate were walking happily, side by side, on their way to the cathedral. While Constance and her father were standing on the landing-place, Harry had simply crossed over, and walked into the saloon, which Kate had entered before setting out on her walk; and if they had remained a moment longer, they might have heard the burst of congratulation with which he greeted her. As for Kate, she was conscious of a rush of pleasurable emotion, such as she had not felt since she left home: and she did not attempt to disguise it, but displayed it frankly—with a frankness which would have misled a sensitive man more than any amount of reserve. She kept back resolutely the little shyness which a consciousness that he had followed her stirred up. As for Harry, he was in a state of ecstatic gaiety. Kate, frankly pleased, was a very pleasant object to look at. He contrasted her, mentally, with Esther, and came quite honestly to the conclusion that he had never cared for the latter, that he had never cared for any one but Kate.

They went out together. Everything was new to Harry, and it was wonderful how Kate seemed to see with his eyes. The very things that had bored her the day before, were fresh and delightful now. They went to the cathedral, Kate expressing a hope that they might meet her father and Constance, which, of course, they did not, though they left no corner unvisited, conversing under the solemn arches till the second service began. She did not care to

see a repetition of what she had witnessed earlier in the morning. Then they concluded that the others must have returned to the hotel.

But Harry's mind was full of the object of his journey, and under the excitement of the hour, he found it impossible to keep it to himself. On their way back, he had poured out his whole heart, all there was of it, to Kate—told her how he had missed her, and how he had followed her, and was ready to follow her over the whole world, for he loved but her alone. And to Kate, who never had a lover, the declaration did not seem too abrupt; it seemed only the impassioned eagerness of love. Had he not a right to choose her and to love her, and was not she free to accept him? The little, silent assent was so easy. It was given in a moment, and Harry had a right to claim Kate Vaughan for his wife.

As they drew near the hotel, Kate became grave and thoughtful. What would her father say to this sudden settlement of the question of her future life?

But was not Harry richer, younger, handsomer than Milly's choice? He was satisfied with it; why should he not be satisfied with hers?

Mr. Vaughan and Milly had come down to breakfast. Their table was laid in a corner, with bread, and fruit, and eggs. The chocolate was cooling in the jug. Ample time had been allowed for Kate's return, and still they had to wait. Constance looked uneasy. Milly kept wondering at the delay. Mr. Vaughan would have gone out in search of her, but that he had taught his girls a confidence in themselves, and a faith in his confidence in them, which he would have been sorry to infringe upon. He would have considered the constant watching and guarding to which some girls are subjected an insult to their sense and to their modesty.

At last Kate and Harry appeared together. Mr. Vaughan, who was looking that way, started as he saw them at the door of the saloon. But Harry came forward in his usual manner, exclaiming, "You did not expect to see me here, did you?" shaking hands warmly all round, and explaining rapidly how, though not why, he had come, having found out from Herbert Palmer the exact spot they were likely to be in on a given day. "Perhaps you will allow me to speak to you in private after breakfast," he said to Mr. Vaughan, loud enough for the rest to hear, however; and bringing a tide of blushes over Kate's face, which had before been paler than its wont.

"Oh, certainly," said Mr. Vaughan, rather stiffly.

It was all that Constance could do to keep from laughing at her father's utter inability to administer a snub. Kate began to explain how she had gone in search of them, and to ask how it was that she had missed them; and Harry, in the meantime, coolly sat down beside her.

Constance noticed that her sister was painfully embarrassed, and came to the rescue by asking Mr. West to breakfast with them, devoutly wishing that he would go away instead. But he sat down quite at his ease, and for the time the meal lasted, he relieved the party of all further embarrassment by an incessant stream of talk.

Somehow it lasted a very short time indeed, every one making a rather hurried breakfast. Constance, who seemed to have taken the lead, rose first, and Kate and Milly followed, and went with her upstairs. It was into Kate's room they went, and not a word was spoken till they had shut the door. Kate saw that her sisters waited for her to speak. She held out her hand to Milly. "I suppose you did not think I should be married almost as soon as you," she said.

"It is very sudden, is it not?" said Milly, gently, and with hesitation, but kissing her at the same time.

"Oh! Kate, it is not settled, surely?" cried Constance, impulsively.

"I am engaged to Harry West," she replied, in an offended tone, "and I think you are both very unkind to take it in this way."

"I was taken by surprise," said Milly. "Do not be vexed with me, Katie dear, I wish you all possible happiness."

"And neither of you are a bit sorry to leave poor papa," said Constance. But she too went up to her sister, and gravely wished her joy. Then she went into her own room, and stood at the window watching her father and Harry as they paced up and down the court—her father with eyes bent upon the ground, listening to the young man at his side, who looked and spoke so eagerly. At length she saw the former somewhat reluctantly hold out his hand, and clasp that of Harry for some time, looking fixedly in his face as he spoke a few last words, and Harry seemed to ring the hand as if in thanks, to listen impatiently, and then to bound away. It was settled.





## CHAPTER XXIX.

### RECONSIDERED.

**A**LITTLE later, Kate was closeted with her father for half an hour, and she came out from the conference with the clearness in her face, as of the sky after a shower, which comes from recent, not too passionate tears. Mr. Vaughan had dealt very tenderly with his daughter—it was not in his nature to do otherwise—but he had earnestly urged her to reconsider her answer to Harry West. “I have given my consent,” he said, “but only conditionally, and the condition is, that you do not ratify it till to-morrow. Mr. West acknowledges that he has been precipitate, and he has promised not to see you again to-day. You know that I have always taught you to consider yourselves free in this matter, and that I would not even influence your choice. All that I desire is, that you should not choose lightly in a matter of such moment. Remember, that it is your whole life that is at stake. Be sure of yourself as well as of him. A change of mind may come too late. It is not too late now, Kate;” and with these words he suffered her to go.

It was not an easy task that had been imposed on her—this reconsideration. How was she to set about it? She could not prove that she did not love Harry. He was certainly attractive to her by outward qualities. She knew that she would not readily have accepted a poor man; yet

she knew also that she had not accepted Harry because he was rich. But the highly fallacious test to which she brought herself again and again was the question, how she would bear her old home life if she went back from this opening into a new and ampler life? for this was the great attraction which marriage offered to her. She felt herself no longer a girl, and in truth she had reached the full bloom of womanhood. A daughter's place did not satisfy her strong individuality. She needed interests and pursuits of her own—a separate sphere to move in. This active nature of hers had been partly satisfied at the head of her father's household, but she felt that it could be so no longer. Milly's engagement had, perhaps, something to do in awakening the feelings of dissatisfaction which she had begun to feel with her life as it was: and this dissatisfaction was not wholly selfish in its root. Refined as it was, her life was after all one of self-seeking; and no human being can be satisfied with that, though many only rush from one form of it to another, and know no other refuge.

Poor Kate became quite bewildered in her attempt at reconsideration; and the end of it was that when she bade her father good-night, she signified that she had made up her mind in the affirmative—a fact which Mr. Vaughan conveyed to Harry that same evening.

On the morrow Kate wore her ring. It was the turquoise engagement-ring which had been bought for Esther. It had not suggested itself to him that as he had changed the lady, he might have changed the love-token.

As yet Esther's name had not been mentioned, but now Constance ventured to ask Harry how he had left her and their old friend Mrs. West. Something very like a cloud of resentment lowered on his face, as he told them that Esther had refused to return, had elected to stay among her own people, "a wretched set, by the place they live in,"

he added; "but I suppose she has a natural taste for that sort of thing."

"She has a natural taste for whatever is most noble and unselfish," flashed out Constance, and she would have quarrelled with her brother-in-law elect there and then, but for a look of reproof from her father. Constance felt sure that Esther had rejected Harry, from that moment, though he had assured Kate that he had never asked her, which was verbally true.

The small amount of interest with which the tour had commenced had completely evaporated, and all felt that the sooner it was over the better;—all but Harry and Kate, who seemed to enjoy everything, and to become more and more radiant with satisfaction—so much so that Mr. Vaughan became reconciled to his new son-in-law, though no two people could well have less in common. "They love each other," he thought, "and that is enough." They might be like two bright rivers flowing together over the sparkling shallows; the channel of their lives would widen and deepen by-and-by.

But Constance observed more closely, and was not satisfied. It seemed to her that Kate was too much occupied with the accessories of her position. That there were too many discussions about where and how they were to live, what they were to do, and where they were to go. The pleasure-loving element in Kate was showing itself under Harry's fostering treatment, and there were better things in her, as her sister knew.

At Brussels there was a great buying of lace for the brides, for they had settled to be married on the same day, Mr. Vaughan giving Milly a veil of the same cost as that which Harry bought for Kate: and Constance could not help noticing that though extravagant and lavish, Harry expended chiefly on himself, and had an inward grudge



"There was a great buying of lace for the brides."





when the extravagance was for another. Kate, she knew, with all her faults, was generous as the day, and she feared accordingly for her sister's future. Other people's futures are so much clearer to us than our own. Kate had no shadow of apprehension.

Kate and Harry caused the party to linger at Brussels longer than they would otherwise have done. Constance was vehement in her animadversions on the place. "It is neither beautiful nor interesting," she said. "Its gaieties have all the effect of dulness upon me. I wonder why there is always a fête in Brussels. The people seem to have nothing better to do. I do dislike people who have nothing to do but to amuse themselves."

At which severe sally Kate and Harry only laughed, without in the least applying the latter portion of it to themselves. It did not occur to these two, at this time, to think what they were going to do with their lives, that is, what use they were to make of them. They only thought what highest kind and amount of pleasure they could get out of them; and, indeed, not what highest kind, but only what highest sensuous kind of gratification they could reach.

And it is easy to underrate the difficulty of a higher standard of life to a man in Harry's position: it can hardly be over estimated. He was a rich man, without any depth of culture to awaken the higher intellectual needs—such as the need of a political or social career. His father had realised a large fortune, partly by sheep-farming, partly by trading, and had left him a noble independence, but had neglected to train him to its uses. The only career which he had open to him was to follow in his father's steps, and make a still larger fortune; and to this there was nothing to urge him. Organized as his resources were, money seemed to make money without much help of his. Then he was amazingly clever at anything he undertook, and this acted

as a barrier to his undertaking anything in particular. He had grown up with no particular fitness for anything, and what is worse, with no particular devotion to anything. Science, art, letters, require sacrifice from their votaries, and there was no motive to urge Harry to sacrifice for any of them. Perfection, mastership, in anything demands hard service, and there was nothing to tempt him to serve. The nature must be noble indeed which can bear the withdrawal of all outward stimulus, and yet exert its highest powers. Certainly Harry West had not such a nature : and therefore he was, what Constance called him, a do-nothing ; and a do-nothing he would remain, unless some great discontent drove him to do a man's work in the world.

About the end of September the party reached home. Herbert Palmer running down to Dover to meet them, and the first news that greeted them was that of the death of Mrs. West. She was not only dead, but buried, for Harry had not thought it necessary to tell Mrs. West whither he had gone ; all that she or Esther knew was that he had gone abroad for a week or two. Therefore the lawyer had taken possession of her effects in his absence, the servants had been dismissed, and Esther, after watching by her till all was over, had returned to her mother, not much richer in anything, save culture and refinement, than if she had never been away.

The lawyer had explained to her that nearly five thousand pounds had been invested for her benefit in the shares of a northern bank. It was possible that something might be saved, but at present the affairs of the bank had gone to wreck, and would take months, if not years, to wind up. Happily the bulk of Mrs. West's property, accruing at her death to Mr. Henry West, was perfectly secure. It was the simple lady's own investments that had failed ; the lawyer adding that she had been ill advised.

Harry West had come into another two thousand a-year, and over his happiness the death of his relative cast a very faint shadow indeed. Mr. Vaughan and Constance, and Kate herself, held that it would be necessary to postpone their marriage; but Harry diplomatically yielding an inch, gained an ell in the long run, and it was finally arranged that the double marriage should take place at the end of October, instead of the beginning, with the understanding that it should be celebrated with the utmost quietness.





## CHAPTER XXX.

### THE FRIENDS.

**T**HE first thing which Constance Vaughan did on her return was to visit Esther. During those weeks of separation she had longed for her as it is supposed that women long only for their lovers, for in treating of women, the cynical vein has prevailed so much of late, that many find it hard to credit that they are capable of friendship at all. Friendships are formed every day, nevertheless, between women—and broken the next, interpolates the cynic—which exceed those of men in intensity, if not in durability. Be that as it may, Constance was one of those natures, rare in either sex, if you will, in whom friendship is a passion. She almost flew to find her friend.

The house she had little difficulty in finding ; but Esther was not there. She was in “the new school,” so a rather drooping girl in a soiled black frock informed her. The building dignified with this title was neither more nor less than the broken-down workshop at the end of the court, which had undergone a thorough repair, and during the last few weeks of Mrs. West's life had been, at her cost, fitted up as a schoolroom for Mary Potter. It was a longish, low building, with windows on either side, and bare, white-washed walls. But it looked clean and well ventilated—that is to say, all the windows were open at the top, and

Constance could hear the hum of the school-children as she stood without.

When she entered, Esther was standing at the end of the room, endeavouring to rouse the minds of a set of very spiritless little girls, while Mary, near the entrance, sat the centre of a similar circle. Esther speedily became aware of her presence by an access of inattention on the part of her class, the wandering eyes all turning in one direction, to look at the stranger.

"Let me wait," said Constance—their greeting restrained by the presence of the children—"let me wait till your lesson is done."

And Constance sat down, while Esther strove to go on with her task. But the effort was useless. It was close upon the hour of dismissal, and the little girls had had their attention roused only to be diverted into quite another channel. They were busy examining every detail of the visitor's attire—one, to whom the great opportunity had occurred, even taking her dress between her fingers to ascertain of what manner of material it was of.

Esther therefore gave the welcome signal for dismissal a little before the accustomed hour, and not without a sigh of relief found herself alone with Constance. She had introduced the latter to her mother; but Mary, after a few sentences of commonplace, had left them together, not without leaving a favourable impression on the mind of her daughter's friend. Constance had been watching her while she waited, and Mary, with the smaller scholars clustered round her knee, had looked like a statue of Charity teaching. Then she had glanced from the mother to the daughter, discovering a deep-seated likeness between them, which the years would in all probability make deeper still, though a cultivated mind, or a firmer nature, made Esther appear the grander and nobler of the two.

Left alone together, to use a sacred phrase, "they fell upon each other's necks and wept." Both had passed through an agitating period, in which the whole aspect of their lives had changed; and there are some, even among the young, whom change touches strangely, even if it be a happy change.

Esther was the first to recover, and she led the way into a little room, a portion of the building walled off, and bare as the rest. To this she introduced Constance as her study.

"It was not furnished when poor mamma died, and it must remain as it is for the present," she explained, as Constance looked round on the bare walls, the two chairs, and the deal table, heaped with school-books, which constituted its furniture.

"And are you happy?" was the first question Constance asked, when they had spent some time in telling each other all that had taken place since they had parted.

"I am busy," Esther answered, with a smile. "I have a great deal to do before and after school-hours. I find how much it is necessary to know in order to do anything well. I find I must prepare to teach even those children."

"And do you spend your time here?" asked her friend, in consternation.

"A good deal of it at present," she answered. "It is not so uncomfortable as it seems. I prefer bareness to ugliness; one can paint bare walls with one's own devices, and fill empty corners with images of their own, when you can't banish the horrible devices and deformities invented by other people. Over the way there, in the parlour at home, there is a hideous paper, huge tea-urns piled on the top of each other, crowned and ornamented with flowers which have the peculiarity of transforming themselves into horrible bloodstained faces. Will you come with me," she added, "and make acquaintance with the family?"

"I will come again," said Constance. "I expect Harry and Kate to call for me," she added, with hesitation. "It was Harry himself who proposed it."

Just then the door of the schoolroom opened, and some one advanced. It was Harry himself, and Kate followed him at a little distance. They had been shopping, and had driven up to the alley in a carriage and pair, to the great edification of the neighbours. Kate was unusually radiant, and exceedingly well dressed. Even before her marriage she had begun to assume the more elaborate toilette, which was her taste, and which suited her. Harry looked back at her, as she came sweeping up the schoolroom, with evident admiration. It heightened his good-humour.

"How pale you are looking!" he cried, turning to Esther, as she advanced to meet them. "How dismal it must be for you to be shut up here all day. Won't you come and take a drive with us?"

His speech was questionable enough in taste, forcing on Esther, as it did, the change in her position; but as he rattled on, his talk had the effect of putting the others at their ease. Kate and Esther met without much embarrassment. Harry himself was the least embarrassing of human beings, and so Esther was rather glad than otherwise that he had come, and that a meeting which she had dreaded was over.

Harry had felt a little sore with Esther. His self-love had been wounded. He was capable of resentment, and of making his resentment felt by the object of it. But Esther had disarmed him. She had no air of conquest. In that black nun-like dress, every fold of which, from her white throat to her feet, an artist would have loved, she was such a foil to his brilliant betrothed that Harry was quite satisfied with her. Perhaps after all she had refused him out of modesty, was a thought just latent in his heart.



Then, as for Kate, she honestly thought that Esther's loss had been her gain, and she was too good to feel pleasure in another's loss, though she did triumph a little in her own gain. The meeting with Esther had been rather a trouble to her. She too was satisfied to get so lightly over it. Esther did not seem to feel it at all; but then Esther had been always very cool and calm, and she seemed cooler and calmer than ever. Kate resolved to befriend Esther on the spot. She would no doubt have it in her power to show her kindness, and Kate liked being kind.

So they parted quite harmoniously, Esther refusing the drive which Kate had urged upon her, on the plea of having to give a music-lesson to a pupil who came in the evening, and Constance promising to return very soon.

The preparations for the double wedding had begun in earnest. Herbert left the arrangement of his modest little mansion entirely to Milly, being called upon occasionally to admire, and duly admiring, whatever was put before him. And Milly's taste was very pretty, leaning a little too much, Kate would say, to white muslin and simplicity, a fault which she would certainly have avoided. But Kate and Harry had resolved not to begin housekeeping at once, but to go abroad for some time, spending the winter at Rome, and returning only when they were weary of foreign travel. So Kate had only her personal appointments to look after, and she entered into the details with a zest which caused Constance no little wonderment. She seemed to her to bestow more thought on the making of a dress than she had done on the making of her marriage itself. She seemed determined not to think.

Then the great question of bridesmaids had to be decided. There was one bride the more, and one bridesmaid the less, owing to the sisters being married on the same day, and it was agreed, or rather Kate had ruled, that they could not

possibly do without four a-piece, though Milly would have been quite contented with Constance and Esther, as at first proposed. There was some discussion as to whether Esther ought to be asked, all things considered; but it had been decided that she ought, as if it would be painful to her in any degree, she had the option of refusing. And Esther did refuse.

"I cannot put off this mourning yet," she said to Constance, who had been deputed to ask her; "and I am not sure of myself. I do not spend my time in vain regrets, as you know, but I need not court a break-down."

"Then you will come to us from Saturday till Monday," said her friend. "You will come and see us all together for the last time. I am sure we shall never be so happy again."

"Never so carelessly happy, I dare say," said Esther; "but we may all have deeper joys."

They were in the schoolroom, empty because it was Saturday afternoon, Constance waiting to be picked up by her sisters and Harry, driving about as usual, when Philip looked in, and would have withdrawn again, seeing that Esther was engaged. But she recalled him. It was the first time he had sought her, and he had doubtless some end to accomplish. She was unwilling that he should be turned away. He obeyed her recall a little awkwardly, and then only to say, with the fault in his utterance more apparent than ever,—

"I came to ask you about the schoolroom, Miss Potter; but another time will do as well."

"My friend is waiting," said Esther. "I am quite disengaged."

She waited for him to go on.

"I have been thinking as the winter comes on that I would like to have a roof over my head, and that perhaps you would let me have the schoolroom on a Sunday evening."

"To preach in?" said Esther, a ready assent in her smile.

"No, to teach in," he answered. "I don't mean to set up an opposition church; though I go out into the highways and hedges, it is only to compel them to come in. But a Sunday-school is sadly wanted here, and I thought you might let the room to me for a small sum."

"You may have it for nothing," she replied.

"I would rather pay for it," he answered, bluntly.

"We are very much indebted to you, Mr. Ward," rejoined Esther, "and you must not refuse to be indebted to us for so small a favour. I will make one condition," she added, quickly, as if a bright idea had come to her; "you must allow me to help you. We shall share the school between us; you shall take the boys, and I shall take the girls."

The sort of white light, which was Philip Ward's smile, came into his face as he thanked her, without a shadow of his former awkwardness.

"When shall we begin?" asked Esther.

"Not to-morrow, perhaps, but next Sunday," he replied.

"Don't you think she works hard enough already?" Constance interposed.

"Time is very precious," said Philip. "We must work while it is day," he added, in a low tone; "the night cometh, in which no man can work."

Constance had heard the sentiment worded before; she had never come across the conviction. She had never seen a man who would neither spare himself nor others because of it. She felt almost ashamed to say that she claimed Esther for the Sunday following.

"Yes, I shall be in the country," said Esther; "but the Sunday after that I shall be at my post."

Philip bowed to Esther and her friend, and turned to go. Near the doorway he encountered Kate and Harry, and stood aside, cap in hand, to let them pass.



## CHAPTER XXXI.

### ESTHER DROPPED.

**R**EDHURST wore the russet of October when Esther drove up to its gate on the Saturday following. Constance had driven to the station to meet her, and had made a slight *détour*, whose pretext was a rather better road, in order to avoid Esther's old home. But "The Cedars" made a point in the landscape, and Esther could not help seeing them. She pointed them out to Constance, dark among the bright, sombre among the gay, but steadfast when all else was changing. "You must help me to steal away some time," she said. "I should like to visit the place, and stand under the old trees."

Constance promised, but with a certain amount of reluctance, which might have been accounted for by a desire to spare the feelings of her friend. And so, to some extent, it was. The truth was that Harry had already sold the place, and disposed of its furniture without reservation. Like everything he did, it was done on the spur of the moment, and with no space left for repentance. Seeing that the broadest of hints was unavailing, Constance had plainly said that she thought there were many things in the old home which ought to belong to Esther; but Harry had refused blankly to consider that she had the slightest claim. It was becoming more and more clear that he was not in

the least degree generous; that he needed far too much for himself to be a liberal giver; and that, though rich, he was one of those people who are always in poverty. Constance, in her secret heart, had thought it shameful that Harry should step into Mrs. West's property, and never consider her wishes with regard to Esther. She had blushed for her sister's future husband when he had sold up everything, even to the books which should have borne Esther's name.

And what Kate thought of these things no one knew. It was too delicate a matter to be discussed in the family circle. "Such discussions only provoke alienation," was Mr. Vaughan's wise conclusion. Give sufficient light—mental, moral, and spiritual—and then let every nature act itself out freely, was the maxim he had carried out in his family, and hitherto with the best results. But he, too, was anxious, as he saw more clearly into Harry's nature. There is such a thing as wilful blindness. Perhaps Kate was shutting her eyes to the faults of this curious, complex character. Complex by reason of its very smallnesses and weaknesses, as one knows a riddle or a puzzle may be. In after-days Mr. Vaughan blamed himself that he had not tried to open her eyes, however roughly, and to change her course, even by the harshest exercise of parental authority.

Herbert and Harry were with the Vaughans as usual, and Constance and Esther were left a good deal to themselves—more, indeed, than the former thought altogether fair. She had grown wonderfully sensitive for her friend, and railed at love and lovers till Esther laughed. But her sensitiveness was caused by a knowledge of the altered position which Esther held in the eyes of the village magnates, and of the possible pain which she might suffer in the course of discovering it, for the pain suffered in such cases is more often proportioned to the sensitiveness of the

victim than to the power of the inflictor. Constance knew by this time—and it was wonderful how the knowledge had shaken that faith in humankind which all generous hearts begin with—that there were few families in Hurst who had welcomed Esther the heiress, who would give a like welcome to Esther the penniless teacher—the daughter of a bricklayer. In the course of the past weeks many were the stabs, stabs at which her father's hair would have stood on end, which Constance had given to avenge her friend on the dames of Hurst. They had shown no sympathy with an utterly faultless misfortune. They had shown plenty of idle, and some ill-natured curiosity, and they had set Constance Vaughan at war with her kind.

Therefore the Vaughans, who were one and all above this sort of thing, kept Esther entirely to themselves, as far as the families in the neighbourhood were concerned. They made a large party at morning service at the village church. There it was inevitable that Esther should encounter these people, out of whose sphere she had dropped, and Constance was prepared to cover her retreat with her sharpest fire. But she got leave to keep her ammunition. There was a good deal of furtive staring at Esther, as she sat in her deep mourning in Mr. Vaughan's pew, which Constance diverted by looking the starers straight out of countenance. But outside the church no one stopped to speak. A few, whom it behoved to be specially careful, as mothers of grown-up sons to whom beauty was still an attraction, had hastened away. Distant bows were all that greeted Esther on her reappearance. She felt the coldness of some among them, but not as Constance felt it for her. As yet she had received no direct repulse. She hardly knew from what quarter a chill had fallen upon her. Mr. Moss, hobbling past on his stick, alone gave her his accustomed "Good morning, miss."

The October sunshine was still warm on that western-fronting lawn, and the party gathered there in the afternoon, with books which they did not read, and which soon lay piled on one of the garden-chairs, a medley of colours and tastes. They had not been there long, however, when visitors were announced, or rather announced themselves, by the sound of wheels, first on the road without, and then on the gravel within the grounds. It was Benjamin Carrington and his mother. They had established the privilege of calling on Sundays after service, and now they had come to pay a sort of farewell visit to the family.

Mrs. Carrington did not exhibit any surprise at Esther being there—in fact, she was quite aware of it, but she was not one of those who would stay away rather than not encounter any one whom she did not particularly wish to see. She was what is called a woman of spirit, which generally means a woman capable of inflicting any amount of pain without wincing. She met Esther in a perfectly unrestrained way, but without the slightest allusion to anything that had taken place. She had taken care, however, to make herself fully acquainted with all Esther's doings. She might even have pitied her had she acted differently, but her unaccountable choice of her own poor relations, seemed to Mrs. Carrington positively disgraceful. "What an extraordinary girl!" she said to her son; and when she had said that, she had expressed the very acme of disapprobation. An extraordinary person was in Mrs. Carrington's eyes obnoxious—obnoxious as an Irish giantess or an American dwarf.

Mr. Carrington wore the languid air, the air of being habitually bored, which was peculiar to him in society, as they went on talking for some time the nothings which people do talk at morning calls, in which the faint germs of interest in the nature of personal experiences are usually nipped in the bud. But Harry was a child of nature, that

most troublesome, if sometimes most interesting, specimen of humanity, and he could not long allow matters to run in the peaceful groove of conventionalism.

"Do you know that Esther has found a hero in humble life?" he said, apropos of nothing, in order to enliven the conversation.

"Indeed," said Mrs. Carrington, coldly. She did not like Harry much, though his sex protected him from her utmost severity.

"Oh, I hope not," said Mr. Walton. "We are all done to death with heroes in humble life. I would like to see a hero in good broadcloth, for a change."

"What is he like?" said Mr. Carrington, shaking himself up.

The question had drawn all eyes upon Esther, but she neither coloured nor looked conscious.

"Like St. Paul a little, I fancy," she replied; and Mrs. Carrington felt that she deserved nothing short of annihilation on the spot.

"Kate, you saw him the other day," said Harry.

Kate looked bewildered. "Was it that grimy little man who stood aside to let me pass?"

"Exactly," he laughed, and the others laughed with him.

"His face is certainly noble when it lights up," said Constance, coming to the rescue.

"What! you have seen him too?" said Mr. Carrington.

"Seen him, and been rebuked by him for idleness."

"What an insufferable prig," said Herbert.

"Oh, I am sick of that word," said Constance. "Men are so afraid of it, that they have not courage to be serious, far less heroic."

"I think the subject of your discussion would be the first to deny that there was anything heroic about him," said Esther. "He is simply penetrated with the idea of Chris-



tianity—the spirit of self-sacrifice, till his life seems a new reading of the gospels. I know that Christianity never appeared so real to me before, such a power to lift and save the world.”

Esther's enthusiasm kindled as she spoke, till her colour rose, and her great grey eyes glittered with its light, confirming Mrs. Carrington's opinion that she was dangerous. If she had looked behind at her languid and fashionable son, she would have seen a kindred light upon his face, which was quenched by Harry's next remark.

“He stammers, and drops his h's, does he not?” said Harry.

Esther blushed with anger. She had noticed the latter failing herself, and despised herself for feeling it a painful one; though strangely enough, it disappeared in Philip's higher moods.

Mr. Carrington saved her a reply. “Oh, that letter h,” he said, in a tone of lightly ringing scorn, which was yet full of bitterness, “it outweighs with us the Sermon on the Mount.”

“How can you say such dreadful things, Benjamin?” said his mother, playfully, as she rose to go. “Use is second nature.” The old lady was interested in the former vapid tittle-tattle. She would have been dreadfully bored by a discussion, which her son would have enjoyed, on the compatibility or incompatibility of Christianity with modern life, and how to keep the two things, culture and Christianity, from diverging further and further.

Mrs. Carrington had just taken a house in town, as her son was finding it more and more inconvenient to live at a distance from the scene of his active life. She was not coming to the wedding, though he was, and, therefore, she was bidding the Vaughans farewell for a season.

“We shall all be scattered next week,” she exclaimed,

with an attempt at pathos; "but I hope we shall meet again after a time." She kissed the brides affectionately, and hoped to see them on their return, holding Kate's hand the longest, because Kate was to be absent for the longest period. Kate, too, had been her favourite among the sisters.

Then she turned to Constance, who was standing next to Esther. "You will be sure to come and see me whenever you come to town," she said. "I hope you will make my house your head-quarters. I shall always be delighted to see you, and you know I am left a good deal alone."

Last of all she held out her little hand to Esther. "Good-bye," she said, blandly. "I believe you are resident in London now," she added, by way of doing her cutting neatly and deliberately; "but I fear I shall not see much of you."

"It is not likely," said Esther, quietly, returning her good-bye, and looking down at the little lady, whose quick, bright eyes wavered under Esther's calm gaze, which was sad too, if the other could have met it. Esther had no resentment for small personal matters. It hurt her more to think that others were unkind, than to experience an unkindness.

Esther went home, convinced that she had left her old life completely behind her—that all the pleasant people whom she had known were nothing to her now—had, in fact, dropped her, and would soon be as ignorant of her existence as if she had gone to the bottom of the sea. It was a bitter enough experience to a large and loving nature, an experience which would have rankled in one less sweet and healthful. If the winnowing fan of circumstance had blown away the chaff, it had left the wheat. After a time, she judged them not at all—the surest way to get rid of all bitterness of spirit. The Vaughans, and especially Constance, remained her friends.

On the Tuesday following, the two weddings came off with great éclat. There was no crying, for no mammas were present. Milly looked charming, so the on-lookers said. That epithet could hardly be applied to Kate, but she was by far the most moved of the two. Then the wedded pairs set off in different directions—Milly and Herbert to the Isle of Wight, for a brief holiday; Kate and Harry to Dover, *en route* for Paris, their first halting-place.





**"Milly looked charming, so the on-lookers said."**





## CHAPTER XXXII.

### THE YEARS.

**I**T was some time since anything had happened to break in upon the quiet routine of Esther's life. Two years of the toilsome work of a teacher had tried, but had not broken her spirit. Often she had felt weary in body and in mind; and sometimes the dark cloud of depression, which from time to time wraps every human soul that looks into the future, would come over her, blotting and blurring the present with mists drawn from the ocean of eternity, and closing in at the gloomy near horizon, and shutting out the light beyond. But she had never repined. She was loyal to her lot. She preferred to remain among her own people, and make their joys and their sorrows her own, rather than go back as a dependent to the sphere she had quitted. It is true, she missed the refinement of the class in which she had been bred; but she strove patiently to introduce it into her new life. The soil of poverty nourishes many a nobler growth, and there is no reason why it should not nourish this.

On the whole, her life was anything but an unhappy one, for she had work to do, and strength to do it. She did not count the years wasted, spent in teaching others—perhaps the least cultivating of all mental work—though she had powers of mind which would have repaid the highest culture. If she had been offered the choice between work and culture

she would have chosen the former, just as she would have chosen duty rather than pleasure, ay, and found in so doing a still higher pleasure.

And the years and the work had added to, not diminished from, her beauty. Her face was several shades paler and thinner, but there was new depth in her deep grey eyes, and lovely spiritual lines had been added round the mouth, which exalted the whole expression.

She had proved herself a born teacher, hardly any but the very dullest refusing to respond to her teaching, and many of her little scholars striving to follow and lay hold of her mind, simply because they worshipped her.

At home, too, her influence had been felt. Sweeter manners than unhappily, are the rule in working-class families prevailed in Mary Potter's home; but Mary wanted firmness especially firmness to resist, and as the younger ones went out into the world, they would have imported its rudenesses but for Esther's influence. The twins alone resisted her influence; churlish by nature, they were only provoked to envy by her sweetness, and drew more together and more apart from the rest of the family, as she became more to all of them. They dressed more gaily than ever, keeping back a portion of their earnings for the purpose, while all the others had a common purse.

Martin and Willie had grown up fine thoughtful lads, already young men, indeed, in strength and appearance. They were earning fair wages as carpenters, every penny of which they gave their mother; yet, even with the two younger boys earning apprentice wages, Mary found it hard enough to make ends meet.

There was nothing Esther felt so much as the narrowness of their dwelling, and she had hit upon a plan for increasing the accommodation of the family in one respect, and that was by turning the schoolroom into a sitting-room in the

evening, for all who were studiously inclined. It ended in everybody preferring to sit there ; and so study became the order of the day, and anything like solitude, like space for lonely thought, was unattainable as ever.

They were all seated there, one evening early in the year, when winter most asserts her waning power, engaged as usual in a great diversity of domestic avocations. A bright fire was burning in the stove at the upper end of the room. A big, white lamp shed its light on the schoolroom table, round three sides of which the family found room, while the other gave a view of the red glow in the stove grate. Mary was engaged in darning stockings, there being a marvellous waste of tissue under the heels of the youngsters, especially of Bob. The twins, home early, were engaged on some articles of dress for themselves. Bob, who was the buffoon of the family, as ready to cut capers as ever, but who had the most sensitive heart of them all, hiding his affection by a grimace—was engaged in illuminating a text. The walls were ornamented already with some of his performances, and they did credit to his artistic taste. The rest were reading, with the exception of Johnny, who was making himself heard now and then from somewhere in the background—a healthy sign, complete silence usually signifying that he had got some more deadly mischief on hand.

It was time for him to go to bed, however, and Sarah rose and carried him away through the covered passage which now led from the schoolroom to the house, a mere roof of wood supported by posts, but which had been made to look very pretty in the summer-time by the aid of a little trellis-work and a few creeping plants. It was the work of Martin and Willie, who thought of the far West as a place where they might put up wooden structures without limit. But to their mother's infinite satisfaction they had given up



talking of the time when they should have saved enough money to set sail to their land of promise.

The interruption consequent on sending off the child was scarcely over when a knock sounded at the door.

"It's Philip," shouted Bob, and ran to open it.

But it was not Philip, for a voice was heard inquiring for Mrs. Potter, and Bob in reply ushered in a stranger.

"You won't remember me," said a bronzed, middle-aged man, advancing into the light and lifting his hat.

Every one looked up, and the look was his answer. No one knew him. It was Mary whom he had addressed, and she looked as blank as the others.

"I see you don't. Well, that's coming back to one's own country. Nobody knows you, and what's more, nobody wants you."

Mary had risen—was standing, trying to make out who it was. "Ned Brown," she said, suddenly, and a look of consternation overspread her face, which was quite enough to verify the last clause of his speech, as she had already verified the first.

"Don't you be put out. Mr. West has told me all about you and everybody else," he said significantly. Mary evidently was put out, as he called it. She sat down, trembling violently; but she asked him to be seated. "I've only come to say good-bye to my old friends," he went on.

"You are going back again?" said Mary.

"Ay, there's no place for me here. Are these your own?" he asked, looking round the circle.

"All my own," replied Mary, following his eyes with a thrill of tender pride, and looking more at ease; "and there are other two in the house."

"What a fine family to take out!" he exclaimed; "just the lads to make their way in the New World."

Martin and Willie looked up eagerly; they had resumed

their task, but in appearance only, for they had been listening to every word.

"Ah, Australia's the place for such as you; there's no room for men to grow in this old country," he said, with bitterness. "I wish I had gone when I was like you."

"We're going," said Martin, with a quiet determination which startled his mother, and showed her that he had never ceased to think of the object of his ambition, though he had ceased to speak of it. "We're going as soon as we can," he added.

"It's not that you won't have to work as hard there as here, maybe harder, but there's more to show for it; it's better worth while working hard," said the stranger.

"We don't mind how hard we have to work," cried both the lads, in a breath.

"You can turn your hand there," went on the Australian, "and not go round and round like a blind horse in a mill, as you do in England. Learn everything you can before you go, from building your own house to baking your own bread, and get up the country whenever you can. Don't stay in the towns—turn squatter, I don't know a better life: plenty to eat and drink (for the working for), a horse to ride on, and room to ride."

The faces of both Martin and Willie were glowing with excitement, and Bob stood open-mouthed at the mention of a horse.

"I am afraid there's not much room for a schoolmistress among your squatters," said Esther.

"Beg your pardon, miss," said the stranger, respectfully, "but in the towns they're greatly wanted, and folks will send in their children from the near stations miles and miles."

The miles and miles sounded dreary enough to Esther, as he went on talking of the wide wastes of the distant land, of the old, never-ending, patient wrestle with the soil;

the subduing of this new earth, and wresting from it abundance for the needs of the body.

At length he started to his feet. "You don't mind my seeing you alone for a bit," he said, addressing Mary.

"No," she replied, leading the way out of the school-room with alacrity, while he nodded good-night to the circle. Mary had dreaded the revival of the emigration scheme, and was not unwilling to put a stop to further conversation on the subject of Australia, though the subject she had now to encounter was one yet more disagreeable to her.

"You know who I want to speak about," he said, as soon as they were alone in the little parlour.

"She thought you were dead," said Mary, on whose tongue lurked no venom. "It is very hard on her."

"That I didn't die!" he answered, with a short laugh. "Well, perhaps, I have no business to be alive, and I will own that what has happened was partly my fault; but I came back to make amends, if she was still alive, and I thought now that we are oldish folks, with nobody to come between us, we might jog along together after all."

"And what do you mean to do?" asked Mary; "surely you will not bring her into trouble."

"No, no! I'll never hurt her. She's neither his wife nor mine now, but I wouldn't mind leaving her a bit of my money in case he should throw her over, and I thought you'd be the right person to leave it with."

Mary made haste to decline, with a perception that this was a matter which money could not mend. Her old friend had not been particularly kind to her in their changed estates, had only once visited her in her widowhood, and yet Mary could not help feeling for her a profound pity. Out of her own undying love for the husband of her youth, she could not but believe that the wife of the man before her retained some love for him.

"Have you seen her?" she asked.

"No, what's the good? She doesn't want to see me, you may be sure," he answered.

"Still she is your wife," said Mary. To her mind nothing could annul that first contract.

"And you think I ought to see her?"

"I cannot tell," said Mary, in perplexity.

"It's all wrong now, and nobody can set it right. What she doesn't know can't hurt her. But he knows already," continued Brown, "and maybe he's tired of her."

Mary bethought herself concerning Timothy; it was just possible that he might be tired of his wife, and that harm might ensue. "You ought not to leave the country without seeing her, I think," said Mary. "Somebody must suffer, but it's better to suffer doing right than to suffer doing wrong. It's better to face the truth of things, and let the worst befall, than live a life of falsehood."

When Mary returned to the schoolroom, after vainly pressing upon the returned Australian her humble hospitality in the shape of an early supper, she found the whole circle excited by a discussion on emigration; so eager was it that anyone would have thought they were ready to embark in the first ship that sailed. Mary reminded them that money was needful, and money as yet was sufficiently scarce in the Potter household. "We can't move without money," said Mary, and her young Martin lifted up his firm, handsome face, and sent a pang to Mary's heart by saying, "No, we can't move without money; but I don't mean to be a slave like that all my life, mother."

"You won't go and leave us, Martin, surely!" said Mary, sorrowfully.

"Not as long as I'm needed, mother; "but," and he spoke more doubtfully, "some have gone away and sent back enough to bring out their whole family. I might go first."

"No, no!" cried Mary, with whitening lips and a gasp in her breath, "we must all go together," and she looked to Esther, as if she should strengthen her appeal.

"Yes," she answered, sympathising at once with the young man's eagerness and the mother's pain; "we must all go together."





## CHAPTER XXXIII.

### AT HOME.

“**W**E never see anything of the Vaughans now,” said Benjamin Carrington to his mother. They had just returned from a dinner-party, and after their silent drive home both felt inclined for a chat. It was not often of late that Benjamin had indulged the old lady with a gossip, for he had been in what she considered a thoroughly unsatisfactory state of mind. He had gone into society, as in duty bound, that is, he had eaten a certain number of good dinners in other people’s houses, and presided over about the same number given to the same people in his own; and he had spent an evening every week or so, with more or less discomfort, in what he called “hanging about,” standing in doorways, turning over music, handing refreshments, occasionally taking a more active part in the programme. Invitations were beginning to thicken. Mrs. Carrington could not conceive a more satisfactory state of things than this, and yet the only human being for whom she cared was utterly dissatisfied.

“We shall see more of them’ now that Kate and her husband have returned,” she said. “They called on me the other day, and Kate is looking handsomer than ever. By-the-bye, we have an invitation to her first ‘at home,’ this day fortnight.”

"I think I shall give up evening parties, mother, and stick to the dinners. After all, one must eat, but there's nothing to be got out of the evenings, no amusement certainly."

"You know it makes me sad to hear you speak in that way, Benjamin," said his mother. "You care for nothing but your books, and your friends are all men who might have been your father's: you will grow old before your time."

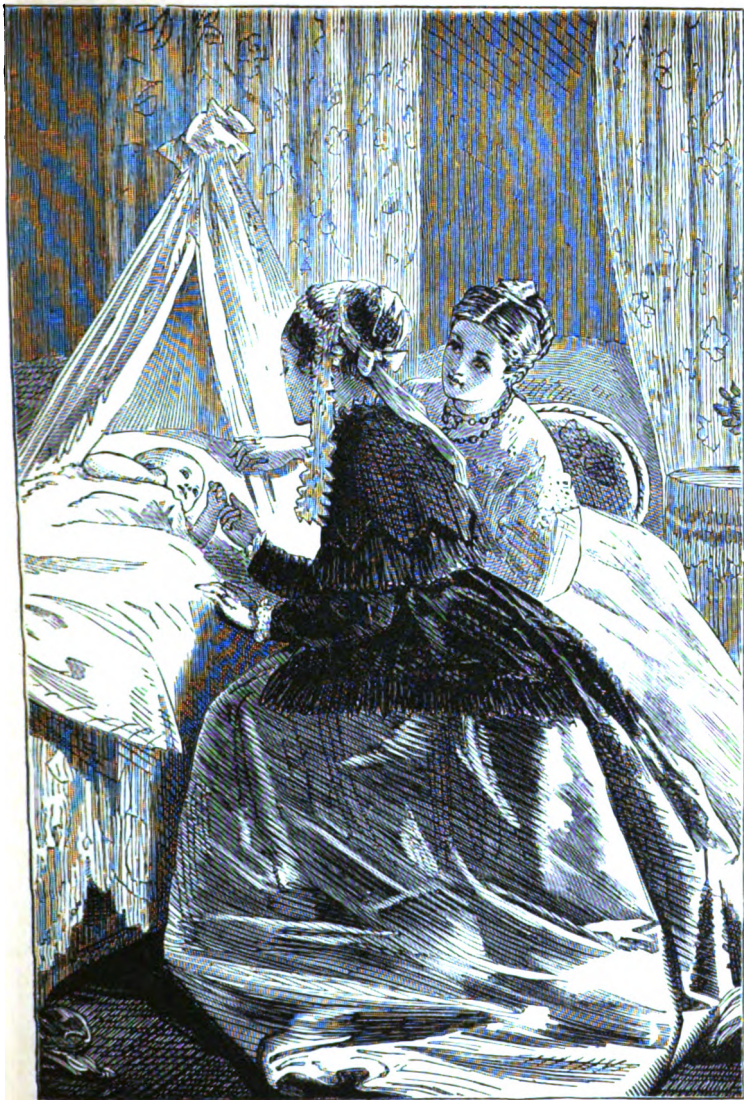
"I feel old," he said, wearily; "I wish I did care for my work as you think, but I am tiring of that too."

Kate and Harry had returned from their wanderings, and had been settled some few months in London. Mrs. Carington thought that the young wife looked handsomer and better than ever. But beyond outward appearance the old lady was not very penetrating. Mrs. West was dressed more handsomely than Kate Vaughan had been; she was arrayed in silk and velvet in the latest Parisian fashion; her colour, too, was as brilliant as ever. The gold that ornamented her small bonnet was not brighter than her hair, and her cheeks were more rose-hued than ever, but any one who loved her could have detected a change for the worse. Her father did, and so did Constance; Milly did not, for she was engaged in babyworship all the time of Kate's first visit, and then Kate had softened even to tears over her little nephew, and had quite satisfied the mother by the fervour of her devotion to the king of the cradle.

Kate was as bright as ever, but a trifle harder; her colour was harder, her eyes had the weary look of much surface-gazing. She could not help showing that she was glad to get home.

"You do not seem to have taken much rest," said her father.

"We have forgotten the meaning of the word," she said.



"Kate had softened even to tears over her little nephew."





And it was true. Kate could have enjoyed luxurious activity or luxurious repose. The only other alternative that would have satisfied her for the lack of both of these would have been a life of unceasing benevolent action ; but that part of her nature was for the present entirely suppressed.

As for Harry, there was no rest either with or for him ; he was delighted with mere physical movement, and so they had moved about perpetually. He exhausted every place in the shortest possible time. A wide view or a brilliant colour delighted him. He had no sense whatever of the deeper harmonies of Nature ; he had no awe for its grandeur, no yearning to share its repose. Kate found herself side by side with a man who, to every deeper emotion, or subtler shade of feeling, was irresponsive as a stone. She had a certain kind of poetry about her. He had not a particle. At first there had been a deepening of feeling toward him ; the awakening of that real love, which comes to good women after marriage when by misfortune it has not come before, and which causes so many marriages of convenience to turn out so much better than any one had a right to expect. The solemnity of the tie, which is so binding, and which isolates the newly-wedded wife from all besides ; the newness of the life, a tender newness which seems as if it would never pass away ; all these feelings came to Kate—feelings so exquisitely sweet to share, and which are the very cement of a true union, for in the mutual experience, spirit draws nearer to spirit in a blessed companionship only possible between those who are thus united. But Harry did not share them. He was perfectly kind and affectionate—exuberant both in kindness and attention sometimes ; but he was never tender. The newness for him wore off in a week. He could not understand why, standing on a vine-wreathed terrace, looking down on the loveliest of Italian lakes, with faint stars twinkling in the blue above and in the blue be-

low, Kate should be sad ; why the loveliness of earth and sky should make her weep ; why the glow on the distant summits should make her cry out, "Oh, Harry ; I wish I could be better than I am. I wish we could lead nobler and better lives." And, instead of clasping the hand stretched out to him almost in supplication, standing there silent by her side, and joining in her aspiration, he would tell her gaily that she was tired, and get her supper and wine, and send her off to bed. And, like buds put out in hot, dry weather, Kate's tenderness and aspiration withered and died ; but not without pain, and not without loss.

And now they were going to try and make a home—had made it, as far as outward appointments were concerned ; and for a time they both took an interest in it, which they had never taken in anything abroad. It was the natural instinct of building a nest and lining it luxuriously which occupied them : that over, they both began to weary. It was not Harry alone who was restless—Kate was as restless as he. But then he had liked his roving life, and she had not.

It required some plotting and planning to get through the wintry days, with their long dark evenings. Society was their only resource, and they had not yet got into the stream of it—that stream which carries on its brilliant bosom so many dull, weary, miserable lives. Kate was making her way, however, and Mrs. Carrington, and several such as she, were bent on her success.

So the old lady returned her visit before many days. It was some time since she had met Constance, and Constance was with her sister then.

"You never come to see me now," said Mrs. Carrington to the latter, before rising to go.

"It is very difficult for me to get away," Constance replied. "You know there is no one but me to take care of

papa now. I am here only because Milly has taken possession of him, and of Redhurst, for the present."

"Now that you are in town, you will come and see me?" pleaded the old lady, quite eagerly. "You will let her come to me?" she added, turning to Kate. "I am so much alone. Benjamin is so occupied that I see very little of him. Between chambers and the courts, and his club, we seldom meet till seven in the evening, close on dinner-time."

"I will come," said Constance, good-naturedly: and so a day was fixed for her visit, and the old lady took her departure, highly pleased with her early success.

In the course of the evening she mentioned incidentally to her son that she expected Constance, having met her at her sister's by chance. "It will be a sufficient test of his feelings," she thought, "if he comes home earlier to meet her."

He did not come any earlier, however. They had the whole afternoon to themselves; and at last Mrs. Carrington asked about Esther. They were talking of her when Mr. Carrington arrived, with barely time to dress for dinner, as his mother had said. Constance had, of course, defended her friend. "She is the only person I know who is thoroughly contented," was the end of the sentence on her lips as Mr. Carrington entered the room.

After shaking hands with Constance, he loitered at a table by her side, lifting a book here and there.

"Of whom were you speaking?" he said, carelessly. "I heard the last part of your speech, and would like to know who is the happy person."

"Esther West," replied Constance. "I dare say you have forgotten her by this time," she added, with a slightly scornful ring in her voice.

The old lady looked up sharply, but her son had turned his back upon her.

"She is keeping a school, is she not?" he said, and hardly waiting for an answer, quitted the room, and did not return again till the dinner-bell sounded. Then he gave one arm to Constance and another to his mother, and they proceeded to the dining-room in silence.

The dinner was rather dull, an unusual thing when Constance formed a third of the company; but in the evening Mrs. Carrington was recompensed. Constance played and sang. She had a very sweet, though not very powerful voice. It was just the kind of singing Mr. Carrington liked. He sat down by her side, and turned her music for her, not before she had finished the page, but exactly at the last note. Mrs. Carrington was satisfied. The young people found plenty to say to each other under cover of the music. She sat rigidly upright by the fire, nodding every now and then, and recovering herself just sufficiently to say, "Thank you, my dear," at the end of a piece, opening and shutting her eyes, not unlike a vigilant cat, and thinking dreamily that it was a pity Constance was so plain. She had lost her fresh colour, and she was not very tastefully dressed. She was hardly handsome enough for Benjamin, but then she could talk well, and he liked that.

Mrs. Carrington would have been very much astonished and not a little scandalised, if she could have overheard the conversation taking place between them. He had reintroduced the name of Esther, and taxed Constance with failing to give him an opportunity of seeing her. And Constance had been obliged to confess that she could not overcome her friend's reluctance to meet either him or his mother, "And indeed," she added, "I really thought you had forgotten her."

"You think I'm a rather contemptible fellow, I see," he said, before its close; and there was no denial from the lips he was watching. "And I have been as constant in my

devotion as a knight of romance," he went on, half in mockery.

"Then, if you have not forgotten her," said Constance, "it would be better if you could."

"My mother wishes me to marry."

"You have no right to marry any one else," said Constance, firmly, "till you prefer another woman to Esther."

"I wish I could see her," he muttered, half to himself. "I don't mind telling you," he added, bending to Constance's ear just as his mother looked up, "that I've haunted her place at all possible and impossible hours, but the fates have been against me."

"You will see her on the evening of the twenty-fifth," said Constance, finishing the noisy Italian piece she had taken to playing for the last ten minutes, "at Mrs. West's 'at home.'"

Then Constance crossed over to the side of the old lady, and chatted with her till the carriage was announced, putting a stop to any further private conversation.





## CHAPTER XXXIV.

### A BAD BUSINESS.

**M**RS. WIGGETT'S temper had not improved with time. She was like a crab-apple—none the sweeter for the sunshine, and she managed sometimes to set her husband's teeth on edge. Having once found his old love, Martin Potter's wife, he (Mr. Wiggett) would not let her drop again. Perfectly conscious of his integrity of heart, he visited Mary in her widowhood from time to time, taking with him little presents of fruit and flowers for the children. If there was anything Timothy coveted, it was his neighbours' children; and he coveted little Mary Potter more than all the rest, and would have taken her to live with him entirely if her mother would have given consent. But true and faithful as he was to the vixenish little woman he had married, he could not help making comparisons when he saw Mary take all manner of petty troubles—which would have made his home unendurable—so sweetly, that they only showed like ripples on the surface of a river. The wind might blow and ruffle the water, it never impeded its deep, harmonious flow.

At first he had given a strict account of his visits; but his information had always been so ill received, and followed by such an increase of crabbedness, that he ceased to mention them.

But so surely as he ceased to mention them, Sarah

Wiggett, sharp as a needle, suspected that he went without letting her know, and made a far greater grievance of the suspicion. It was not within Timothy's skill to minister to the diseased mind of his wife, and he shrugged his shoulders and went on his way, a good deal less happy than he deserved to be.

One day in February—it was the twenty-fifth—Timothy went into town, with the intention of seeing Mary Potter before he came back, and of asking his favourite Polly, and perhaps one or two more, to spend a week at Hurst. The little girl had been with them at Christmas, and, though Sarah had not been cordial, he thought the child's visit had done her good. Esther had been staying at Redhurst at the same time, and had brought Constance Vaughan about the place; to all of which proceedings Mrs. Wiggett had, no doubt, objected; but Timothy argued that it was necessary to assert his individual freedom sometimes, and that he could hardly assert it in a more harmless way. He, however, determined to say nothing in the present instance until it was a settled matter that the little girl should come.

Mrs. Wiggett happened to know that he had not much business to transact, and drew her own conclusions when her husband named a rather late hour for his return, though on this occasion he was not going to start till after their noonday dinner. No sooner was he fairly off than she ran up to her room and donned out-door attire—a thick veil and a dark, long-unused cloak—and started in his track. She had to walk to the station, while he was driving; but if she was lucky enough to catch a train, she would arrive at the place of his destination almost as soon as he.

The little woman *was* lucky enough to catch a train, and, having walked from Waterloo Station to the nursery and seedsman's place which her husband had indicated, was also lucky enough to see him alight there, and remain in the back



premises long enough, Mrs. Wiggett believed, to transact all the business of the world.

A patient street boy was holding his horse all the time. And what was she to do when he came out and remounted, and drove quietly back? She had never considered what she would do in any case, and she did not determine that. Only, as she passed up and down, she got more weary, and crosser than ever.

At last his burly figure could be seen in the doorway, and she only just checked herself from running up to him and exclaiming against the time he had kept her waiting. He mounted his seat, and drove away. She hastened after to the turning-point. It was the wrong way he went, and the fiercest passion she had ever experienced became as smoke compared to that which burst into conflagration at the sight. She hastened along the crowded street, sometimes on and sometimes off the pavement, keeping the vehicle in sight. It was no difficult matter, as, owing to the crowded state of the thoroughfare, Timothy was obliged to drive slowly; but near St. James's Palace her pace became a run, causing the passers-by to stop and stare after her.

The waggonette entered the park, and went bowling under the leafless trees at a rate which soon left her utmost speed behind. Still, she kept up her pace, and, when she could no longer see it at a distance, held on her way, with the fixed purpose now of tracking him to his haunt.

After a time, she was astonished to find that the waggonette had stopped—was stopping, drawn up to the side of the carriage-way. She walked on. Timothy had dismounted—was talking to some one. Dare she venture closer? Yes; she would risk discovery to gratify her curiosity; march boldly up to Timothy, if need be, and tell him she had started off after him to visit Mary. She

walked up, passed quite close, taking the side to which Timothy's back was turned, looked keenly into the man's face who was talking to him, heard a few disjointed words, and hid herself behind a tree which stood close beside them.

The two men talked for some time in low tones, and then she saw her husband remount, and, instead of going forward in the direction of Mary Potter's house, turn back the way he had come. But Sarah Wiggett no longer followed him. She followed his companion across the park, and out at its western entrance, making herself quite sure of his identity, and then she returned and sat down on a bench, in the piercing cold of the already darkening day.

As Timothy Wiggett was driving steadily along, he had been astonished by a shout, which rose from the wayside, and by a stranger, evidently desiring to stop his course. He had stopped accordingly, and no long time sufficed to discover who the stranger was. They had never known each other, except by sight; but Timothy Wiggett knew that he confronted his wife's former husband, even before the other had declared his name. He made haste to dismount, very red in the face, and his mouth falling dismally at the corners. Latterly, he had persuaded himself that he was not bound to believe in the existence of Ned Brown, except on ocular demonstration; and that was at length forthcoming.

The two men shook hands as a preliminary. They had no spite against each other, and it was so far well. Then Ned Brown opened the conversation, and, alluding to the position, shook his head, and said it was a bad business.

"A shocking bad business," said Timothy.

Then each asked the other what was to be done, and both were in utter perplexity.

"You ought to have her by rights," said Timothy.

"But I don't know that I particularly want her now—now that she's been your wife for years," said Ned; "and she mayn't want me neither."

Then a thought came into Timothy's mind for which he would have blushed, if he had been capable of blushing; but nature could not achieve a deeper red than already showed in the honest gardener's face. If Ned would take Sarah back again, he would be free, and there was Mary Potter, a widow, and with a family—the whole ten were not too many for Timothy. But Mary's sweet, sad eyes came into his mind to reprove him, and looked down the selfish thought. What he said was, "Suppose we give her her choice?"

"How?" said Ned Brown.

"Why, you go and see Sarah, and don't say I know anything. I'll give you a chance. Then you ask her whether she'll go with you or stay with me, and it'll be all right, won't it, whichever way it goes? You've married her and I've married her, and we've both got a right to do the best we can by her—that's all I can see."

"No I won't. If you're so willing to stick to your bargain, I'll not come between her and you. I thought you might be rather glad to be rid on't. And I came back only to make amends to her. She's better off with you than ever she was with me, so I'll take myself off as quietly as I can."

"It's all right, I suppose?" said Timothy. If he could have explained, he would have said, not in point of legal but of moral right, "I didn't know, and you didn't know, and she didn't know." The case was evidently too much for him. It was bewildering his brain, or else a seizure of apoplexy was threatening him, which seemed probable, for he added, "I would like you to let me know if you die first."

"I'll send you word," said the other, with a grim smile;

"but you can think of me as one gone to another world. I'm off." And the two men parted company.

"No," thought Timothy, as he drove away, "she'll never know anything about it. If I've done wrong, I mean right by her." He never thought of appropriating the blessing of the merciful, but only of being made to bear the blame alone.

Ned Brown, looking after him, said to himself, "That's the best fellow in creation, and Sally's been a lucky woman at last."

And while Timothy, in no mood to pay his intended visit, was driving back to his home, and with kinder thoughts than usual for his wife, because she stood more in need of kindness, she, unhappy woman, cursed by her jealous temper, as well as by the fear of the retribution which awaited her, was wandering distractedly, driven by the terrible resolution to return no more. She could not believe in mercy, for she was herself unmerciful—in generosity, for she was herself ungenerous; and she could no more have believed her Timothy capable of the resolution he was even then acting out, than she could have been capable of a similar act. She believed that from henceforth and for ever he would close his heart and his house against her. With her wonderful acuteness she jumped to the conclusion that he would at once think of Mary Potter. He had turned back only to dismiss her.

How she hated that man who had spoilt her life! She was mad with rage, and hate, and despair; but in the midst of it she felt faint with hunger. Going out of the park, she wandered into the Westminster district, on the other side. There she went into a baker's shop and bought a few cakes; then she wandered back again, and sat down on a bench to eat them, which she did greedily. She had resolved not to live another night—and the night was fast falling.



## CHAPTER XXXV.

### STREET LAMPS.

**T**HE evening of the 25th was closing in when Esther went up to her little room to dress for Mrs. West's "at home." She had promised to go early, and be with Kate an hour or two before the other guests arrived. This party was an ordeal from which she shrank almost with pain, for she knew that she would encounter there some who had known her as Esther West, and who had ignored her very existence as Esther Potter. But Mr. Vaughan, her firm friend and adviser, was to be there, and Constance, who had held to her with more than a sister's affection, and Milly, whose precious baby was to be accommodated for the night upstairs, while its mother joined in the gaieties below; and they had all united in pressing her to come, till it seemed impossible to refuse without a reason more palpable to them than incongruity of circumstances. There was in her heart, too, a natural desire to revisit a scene, though the scene was only an evening party, which had been familiar to her—to look upon it with other eyes and from another point of view.

So from among the treasures of her past, most of which had already been adapted to the uses of the present, Esther took a dress of silvery gray silk, and a set of silver ornaments. She usually wore her hair coiled up in the simplest





“With the light shining down on her uncovered head.”

fashion ; its royal lengths, which, when shaken out, fell below her waist in wavy masses, formed a natural crown. She did not alter it in any way—only bound it with a band of silver filigree, while another of the same encircled her head a little above the brow. It was a fashion trying enough to most faces and figures, but it suited perfectly with hers. It gave to view the full play of the regal neck and shoulders, and the classical beauty of the outlines of cheek and chin. Her dress was simple to severity—not a touch of colour to relieve it ; but the silver bands shone on the lofty head, and the lights and shadows played among the folds of the silvery silk in perfect harmony with her quiet but majestic beauty.

The cab was waiting in the street, but she had to walk up the court and passage that led to it. However, it was dark enough to shelter her from prying eyes, and cold enough for everybody to be in-doors. Just where the cab stood a street lamp threw its light upon the pavement, and as Esther stood for a moment beneath it, Philip, carrying his basket of tools, came up on the other side. Intent on gathering up her skirts, she did not see him ; but he had seen her, with the light shining down on her uncovered head, with its glittering silver braids, and glancing on a lovely arm that gleamed white as snow in the darkness.

And now she had entered the cab, and the door was shut. She was about to be whirled away to shine in another sphere—a sphere into which he could not enter, could not follow her ; and a fountain of bitterness welled up in his heart at the thought, all the more bitter because of the sweetness of his nature, all the more terrible to him because he could not control it—could not at the moment tell from whence it sprang.

Esther, looking out at the cab window as she drove away, saw and recognised him, and wondered at the sternness of the fixed white face. She smiled and nodded, but he had

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not seen her then. Was he displeased at her for indulging in the gaieties of the world? she asked herself. And she carried with her a graver air because of the stern look which he had worn.

But not for her—all the sternness was for himself, for his own jealous heart, for his own broken peace—the peace which was to him the sign and token of a Divine presence. He had entered upon a terrible eclipse of the spirit. This fair moon had come between him and the sun—had been coming slowly between him and spiritual light and heat, and now all of a sudden it was total darkness.

He passed up to his solitary room, and went mechanically through his ordinary evening routine. He lighted the fire, which was already laid, and prepared his evening meal. Then he sat down, not with unwashed hands, to eat bread, literally bread, and nothing else. There was no one to say how tired and ill he looked, no kind eyes to rest upon, or to rest upon him and lighten by sharing his trouble, whatever it was. He drank the tea he had prepared, but the bread he scarcely broke: it seemed to choke him. Mechanically he put the meal aside, and sat down at the bare deal table, crossing his arms upon it, and laying his head upon them.

There he sat, motionless, till the sensation of choking made him start up, with the veins swollen on his fair temples, and a dry glare like madness in his eyes. Any one who had looked in on Philip then might have thought him mad. He walked up and down like a caged creature. He smote his temples with his open palms. He ground his teeth together. He stretched his arms out to the empty air, as if to embrace something, and then let them fall, as if lifeless by his side.

But Philip was not mad; only a long-growing, long-repressed passion had burst forth, and obtained the mastery

over him, as a long-smouldering fire breaks into flames at last. His whole nature was in insurrection—that which was highest in him as well as that which was lowest; and there is a higher and a lower in all. He felt the tearing pangs of jealous passion. He felt the black despair of rebellion against what he believed to be the will of God concerning him—his condition in life. His wounded conscience warred with his senses, and these had struck down the defending will. A keen consciousness of power awoke in him, of the power of intellect which would have set him in the high places of life, if fate had not bound him in the bondage of labour. A consciousness of power to know and to be known, and also of power to love and to be loved, which all men of passionate energy have more or less, and in virtue of which they conquer, because their power asserts a real claim, which makes itself felt in the woman's heart. In the midst of his paroxysm there came upon Philip, born of the peculiar tenderness of his nature, a feeling almost of pity—which was yet not self-pity—that this power of loving should run, as it were, to waste—that she whom he loved should never know its sweetness and its depth.

He never for a moment imagined that Esther would return his love. He had never sought it in any way whatever, and passion like his has ways of making itself felt far more potent than speech. He had sat Sabbath after Sabbath within the same walls, the same atmosphere of youthful religious earnestness around them, and engaged in the same tasks; yet he had contented himself with a few indifferent words at meeting and at parting. He had refused to look upon her face, though it satisfied him as nothing else had ever done. She was by far the frankest, the kindest of the two. But in her sweet, frank kindliness he knew that there was no love, and he had repelled it, conscious of its danger.

But this earthly love, which he strove to repress and trample on, had come between him and the love divine.

"O God, has it come to this!" he groaned; "that I could give up everything for her, Thy love itself!"

His heart cried out for the commonest earthly lot with her, with the loves of wife and child, rather than the lot he had chosen—the life of sacrifice, the life of Christ. He wanted happiness, and not perfection. His great ideal had become a blank, and on each side stood denial and despair.

At length he could bear it no longer. He seized his cap and went out, to soothe himself with motion. The snow had begun to fall. All the air was in a giddy whirl of falling flakes, which seemed to freeze as they fell. He stood on the threshold awhile before plunging into the midst of them—stood looking over to the parlour-window of the Potters' house, from whence a bright light was streaming. A small figure, in a cloak and veil, came up and stood before it. The figure attracted his attention. The woman threw up her veil and looked within. Philip could not see her face with any distinctness, even when she turned it towards him, because of the whirl of the snow-flakes; but she raised her arm wildly, with a gesture of menace which astonished her involuntary onlooker.

Then, with a sort of animal cry, which she muffled with her cloak, the woman moved away. Philip had nothing to do but to follow. He was filled with pity. Here was a human being as mad and wretched as himself. At first she seemed bewildered, as if at a loss which way to take, and Philip was on the point of addressing her, when a small boy passed, whistling, along. Him she stopped, and evidently asked her way. Then she hurried on in the direction of the river, so fast that Philip could hardly keep pace with her.



## CHAPTER XXXVI.

### AN ACCIDENT. .

**M**EANWHILE, Esther had reached young Mrs. West's fashionable mansion in — Street, and had been admitted behind the scenes to witness the by-play in which most of what is really interesting in human life takes place. Well-dressed people congregate at parties, crowd together at places of amusement, and stream along the streets of the city, but it is not in public places that their real characters come into play, that their real histories are to be learnt; and yet in such places the by-play is going on continually for such as have eyes to see it. Every human being in a crowd would be interesting, if one only knew enough about him or her to give significance to the attitude, the expression, the act of the moment. It is the staple of humanity that is really interesting, not the exceptional growth of it. The great people, the clever people whom you covet to know, are, perhaps, not a whit more entertaining than your humdrum neighbours, if you were gifted with the power of understanding them.

All three sisters were in Kate's dressing-room when Esther arrived, and they were all engaged in the duties of the toilette. "This is like old times," said Milly, as Esther helped her to the completion of hers, for her dress was only a modification of that which she had worn at her wedding, which

with care and little party-going had lasted until now. And yet it was very unlike the old times, when the three sisters, and Esther, too, had dressed alike and thought alike; or at least when the substance of their thoughts, like the substance of their garments, was of the same texture. Now both were alike widely different. Milly was the least changed. She had blossomed into motherhood, that was all; she still did "looking good" to perfection, especially when she carried Esther upstairs to admire her boy, and took him in her lap, heedless of white silk and laces.

Kate arrayed herself with greater elaboration in a dress of green and white brocade, which in its stiffness and splendour revived the mode of the youth of our grandmothers; and when the sunny head and Clyté-like shoulders, with just a little too much of the fair skin visible, rose from their sheath of white and green, she looked as handsome a young matron as any in Belgravia.

Constance, on the other hand, wore a dress of black velvet, up to the throat and down to the wrists, relieved only by collar and cuffs of lace.

"How nice you look," she said, kissing her sister's neck.

"I am sorry I can't return the compliment," said Kate; "I don't like that funeral-looking dress of yours; it makes you look as grim as possible."

"I mean to be grim," said Constance, in her tone of light mockery; "I am the old maid of the family, and I mean to protest against the vanities of you young matrons."

"How can you talk such nonsense, Connie?" said her sister. "You are not three-and-twenty, and you speak as if you were twice that age. Besides, you will be more conspicuous in that black dress than I shall be in this one; and I know somebody who will single you out in the crowd," she added, smiling.

Just then a voice was heard calling out, half way up the

stair, "Are you not ready yet?" It was Harry, who had got out of patience pacing up and down the drawing-room alone.

"Go down, some of you, and keep him company," said Kate, looking annoyed, and Constance drew Esther's arm within her own and obeyed.

Harry wheeled round in the middle of his promenade, and hailed Esther with pleasure. She was something fresh to look at for the time, and he did look at her, till she could hardly help laughing.

"You are looking remarkably well," he said. "I should have thought you would be fagged to death in that horrid school."

"No, I am not at all fagged, as you call it. I am sometimes heartily tired; but I like my work, and begin again fresh every morning. I don't call that fagging."

"No," said Constance, "certainly not; when you're fagged you begin by being tired."

"I know I'm tired enough of this sort of thing," said Harry, dolefully.

"What sort of thing?" said Esther, laughing, apparently not thinking the roseate young gentleman a fit object of condolence.

"Of party-going and party-giving," he replied.

"You're a little impatient, I fear," said Constance. "Your first season has hardly begun; what will you be before it is over?—what before you have gone through another, and yet another of the same?"

There was a ring of real weariness in her voice as she spoke in her lightest mood, that made Esther look at her, and for the first time observe that she looked sadder than of old.

"Oh, I couldn't stand it," he cried, "and I won't try. I've had enough of it already. It's the same thing over and over again. Everybody says the same thing to every-

body else, and of course they mean nothing. That's all you get for listening. And if you talk"—"Which you are pretty certain to do," said Constance, in a parenthesis—"nobody listens. I see them looking past me into all the corners of the room, in search of somebody they want to see, I suppose. Such people don't interest me a bit."

"What does interest you?" asked his sister-in-law, with a little covert sarcasm. "Everything by turns, and nothing long," she added, answering her own question.

Esther listened to the little sparring match with serious concern. "You are tired because you have nothing to do, Harry," she said. "If I were you I would go into one of the professions yet."

"I think I shall go back to Australia," said Harry, carelessly. "I have been speaking to Kate about it."

Constance started. "Indeed!" she said; "and what does Kate say?"

"Oh, she won't go with me."

"Then, of course, you won't go?"

"Why? I think I shall. She can stay at home till I come back."

"Go without Kate!" said Constance, indignantly. "Is that all you care for her?"

The scene was becoming quite painful to Esther, when Kate in all her splendour sailed into the room.

Constance, in terror, changed the subject abruptly to Milly's baby, saying she had left him sleeping like an angel, if angels ever slept.

"I wish we had a baby," remarked Harry, discontentedly—a speech at which Kate's face became for a moment almost convulsed, and Constance looked as if she could have bitten her tongue for her innocent but unfortunate speech.

"What a dreadful misery it is," she took an opportunity of saying to Esther a little later. "These two have ceased

to care for one another; and I don't know—cannot even guess—how it will end.”

At length the company began to arrive, and everybody became smooth and smiling; everybody but Constance, who had not the faculty of clearing her brow and brightening up her face at command, and looked dismal accordingly. It was a very gay little gathering, consisting of the youth and fashion of the higher middle class, treading close on the heels of the aristocracy in culture and refinement, and sufficiently aware of the fact to be rather shy than otherwise of any stray member of the great families who found his way into their circle, though ready enough to respect a man of rank on any other ground than that of birth.

Their weak point was certainly their women. Esther was by far the finest woman in the room. Kate—her real beauty always rather lost in a crowd, and overpowered by her dress—passed unnoticed among other dresses equally handsome. Constance was looking harsh and gloomy. The other girls in the room were either too heavy—as if, to speak plainly, they were overfed—or they were pale and feeble, as if from inertness and want of exercise.

But Esther looked superb. All over the room the eye followed the majestic and yet light figure, and rested on the sweet and yet animated face. She was evidently finding the party very interesting indeed.

The Carringtons were early, but the dancing had already commenced, and Mr. Carrington had nothing better to do than to watch the unconscious Esther from the back of his mother's chair, where he had stationed himself. Then, as soon as that fit was over, he went straight up to Constance, and, to his mother's extreme satisfaction, chatted with her most perseveringly.

“Why don't you speak to Esther?” said Constance, at length; “your mother has been quite cordial to her.”



That perverse young gentleman had been longing for nothing else the whole evening. But he was one of those people who can never take the happiness within their reach—one of those who will rather have nothing than have only a portion of that which they desire. There was always some remote conclusion, some delicate reserve in his mind, which hindered him from acting on those around him.

Constance's words gave him the impulse to act. He went up to Esther immediately, and before long launched into a serious topic of talk.

It was something worth seeing, to an acute observer, the intense seriousness with which Benjamin Carrington went through that *tête-à-tête*. And it was serious enough matter to him, as such things often are. He had once more placed himself within reach of an influence powerful as the attraction which keeps the planets in their orbits. But it was not the seriousness of thought which he felt. Thoughtful as he was, all thought had forsaken him. It was the seriousness of feeling. They kept up the conversation to the last, and when the evening was over he felt almost powerless to quit her side.

He had contrived to let her know that for him the enjoyment of the evening had but begun, and the knowledge was strangely sweet to her. It was dangerous, too, and she felt it—felt the gulf which circumstance had placed between them, with a sudden revulsion of feeling which chilled her tone, as she said, "Excuse me; I must go immediately."

He expressed his regret almost too strongly.

"I am like Cinderella," she added; "I must fly when the clock strikes twelve. My mother is sitting up for me."

"You will take some refreshment first," he said. The subtle grace and tenderness of his bearing towards her was exerting its influence upon Esther. Her impulse was to resist it, to fly from it. And he was pressing to her lips

the cup he himself had drank of, which, when once tasted, rouses a thirst which nothing else will quench.

It was past the time when Esther's cab was ordered, and she was becoming quite anxious for its arrival. Pair after pair thronged the supper-room, and among them came Harry, with Mrs. Carrington on his arm. They came up to where Esther stood, with Mr. Carrington by her side, and when Harry had helped Mrs. Carrington, Esther contrived to whisper to him her anxiety to get home.

He offered at once to see if her cab had come, which was what she wanted; and, bidding mother and son a sweet but stately good-by, she crossed the hall to the cloak-room, and was ready in a few minutes. Her cab, however, was not to be heard of for any amount of shouting and calling. Harry, of course, was making a tremendous fuss about it. He was assured that, in all probability, it would not make its appearance at all, cabby having been paid his fare, and not being likely to inconvenience himself by concluding the bargain. A waiter came back, blue-nosed and breathless, to say that there were no cabs to be had. The streets were dangerous, and they had been led home. And Esther, in sad perplexity, was standing in the hall, when Mrs. Carrington's carriage having been announced, that lady, leaning on her son's arm, came out and stood beside her, while Mr. Carrington got a furred cloak from the footman and carefully wrapped her up.

Harry jumped at the solution of his difficulty. "It's all right," he whispered Esther; and before she could interfere to prevent him, he had asked the Carringtons to drop her on their way. There was no getting out of it for any of them. Mrs. Carrington was too much a woman of the world to do anything that she could not do with ease and grace, and she could not have refused with either.

"With pleasure," she replied.

"We shall be most happy," echoed her son; and for himself he replied truthfully.

It was certainly not much out of their way; but it seemed to Mr. Carrington that they were hardly seated in the soft-rolling carriage when they came to a stop. He could have wished it to go on for ever, while from his dark corner he could see opposite to him, in the light of the carriage lamps, that sweet, earnest face. He was drinking the charmed cup to its very dregs to-night, and to-morrow there would be the fatal thirst.

The carriage had come to a stop—not smoothly, as it ought to have done, but with a shock, and a stumbling, and a slipping of horses' feet, and an exclamation from the coachman. The next minute Mr. Carrington was standing on the snowy pavement.





## CHAPTER XXXVII.

### PHILIP'S HURT.

“**S**TAY where you are, mother,” cried Mr. Carrington ; “there is no danger whatever.”

Esther had alighted unassisted, and was about to help her to descend the steps of the carriage, under the apprehension that an accident had occurred.

An accident had occurred, but not to the carriage, about which Mrs. Carrington was solicitous. The old lady resumed her seat, and called to her son, “Is there anything wrong ?”

It was the coachman who made the answer : “It’s only a man knocked down, ma’am.”

Mr. Carrington was at that moment engaged, along with the footman, in lifting the prostrate form, while Esther, coming forward, uttered a suppressed cry.

“Had you not better come away, Benjamin ?” exclaimed the old lady, again thrusting out her head impatiently.

But Benjamin neither heard nor heeded.

“Carry him into my mother’s house,” Esther had said ; and Mr. Carrington and the footman followed her with the insensible Philip, while she led the way thither.

They set him on the little sofa in the parlour, and Mary, who had thrown aside a heap of homely needlework, was swift to bring a pillow and lay him down there. It was not

long before he came to himself sufficiently to open his eyes and try to raise himself and to speak.

It was a curious group on which Philip opened his eyes. There stood Mary Potter at his feet, and beside her an elegant-looking young man in evening dress. By his side knelt Esther in the same gay attire, and in the background hovered the footman, not knowing what to make of the scene before him, but waiting his master's orders with his air of accustomed formal seriousness.

Philip contrived to raise himself, but it was with a groan that he did so; and as he uttered it, a red stream burst from his death-pale lips. Nearly as pale as himself, Esther held her white handkerchief to them for a moment, till he took it from her hand. He did not thank her; but his eyes rested on her lovingly, and they had a wonderful power of expressing lovingkindness.

"Where are you hurt?" said Mr. Carrington, gently.

"Here," he replied, faintly, laying his other hand on his side.

"Can you tell me where to find the nearest surgeon?" said Mr. Carrington, turning to Mary.

"Take me to the hospital," said Philip, now fully roused; "I have no one to care for me."

"We all care for you," said Mary. "We will not let you go."

"If he is able, it is the best thing that he could do," said Mr. Carrington.

Philip rose to his feet. "I am quite able; it is all here," he said, still holding his side.

"Some of the ribs are broken," said Mr. Carrington, after having felt within Philip's vest.

To Esther it sounded very dreadful, and she gave a pitiful sob.

"Drive your mistress home," said Mr. Carrington, turning

to the footman ; "and come back here for me as quickly as possible." Then, taking further thought, he followed the man out of the house. It was more than likely that his mother might refuse to go on without him.

He hastened up to the carriage window, and Mrs. Carrington burst forth impatiently, "I thought you were never coming back. I am perishing with cold sitting here."

"I am sorry you have been kept waiting, mother," he said, gently. "You can drive home now, and send the carriage back for me."

"Are you not coming with me?" she exclaimed, in astonishment.

"I must stay and look after this poor man a little," he replied.

"Can't the police look after him?" she rejoined. "He is very likely tipsy—these sort of people always are. What was he doing out at this time of night?"

"He is not tipsy, mother; and he has been hurt in trying to do us a service," he answered, patiently. He was too much accustomed to her to notice her unreasonableness.

"How did it happen?" she asked. "What was Reynolds about?"

"I will tell you another time, mother," he replied; and this time with an impatient gesture. "Drive on."

This last was addressed to the coachman, and, waving his hand, the carriage moved off, and Mrs. Carrington resigned herself to her corner, and to mental animadversions on "that Quixotic boy," as she had more than once called her son.

To tell how it happened we must go back to the earlier part of the evening, when Philip left his home, and followed through the snow the strange woman who had stood before the Potters' parlour-window with a gesture of menace.

The falling snow was bewildering; the movements of

the woman were bewildering too. Philip followed her to the bridge, and saw her lean over the parapet and look down into the river. It was a strange night to choose for outdoor meditation; on another kind of evening he could have understood it. He passed, and repassed, and would have spoken, but that his spirit was too sore to bear the repulse which certainly awaited him, too sore to bear repulsion from the meanest of his kind.

Then, as if scared by the passers-by, of whom there were still a few, she abruptly quitted the bridge, and hastened along the side of the river. There was very little to be distinguished in that maze of snow-drift, even close at hand, and nothing at all at a little distance, and not wishing to appear to watch her too closely, he allowed her to pass out of sight, and awaited her return. That she must return he knew, for the path along the river-bank ceased at a certain point. After waiting for a while, he followed with a quickened pace; but the woman was gone. She must have escaped past him in the darkness on the other side of the way: except the river, there was no other outlet.

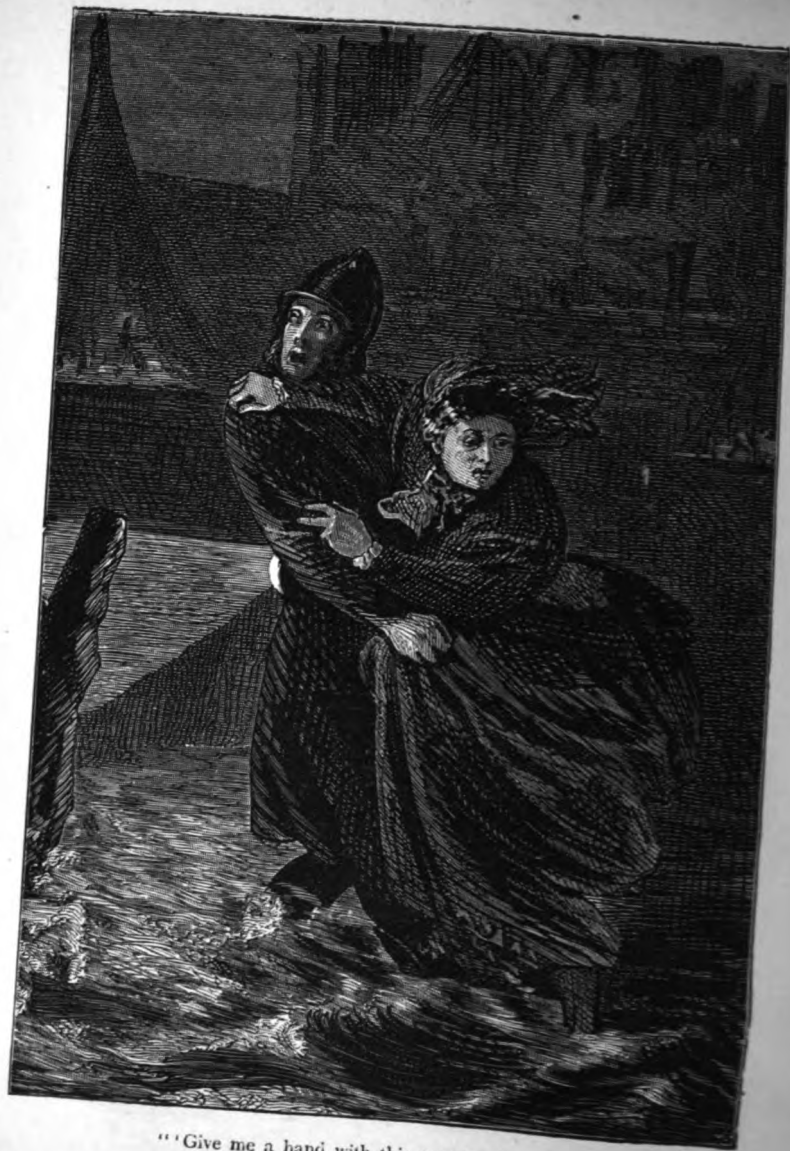
Then he became absorbed in his own troubles. The blackness closed over his soul; the horrid cruelties of sin assailed his shrinking spirit. He could not utter a cry for pity to the pitiless heaven above him, to the horror of great darkness around him.

He stood still by the river-brink. Not a sound came up from the blackness. There was a light mid-way in the stream, whose faint dismal reflection only served to show how black it was beneath, above, on every side. Some barge was floating down with the tide. Then another light moved towards where he stood, no doubt the policeman on his beat.

Suddenly there was a splash, and the light on the shore disappeared. Philip ran in the direction of the sound, and gave notice of his coming by a cry.







"Give me a hand with this woman here,"

He was answered from the foot of a flight of steps that led down to the river's brink, and which he had passed in the darkness—the steps of an immemorial ferry, which still plied over the busy stream. A policeman's lantern guided him, and a policeman's voice called out for his aid. It was here that the woman had disappeared. She was now struggling doggedly but silently with her rescuer.

"Give me a hand with this woman here, will you?" he cried.

Philip descended, and helped to drag her up upon the bank.

"A nice mess you've made of it," said the man, savagely, and shaking the water from his nether garments by stamping violently. "You took care to choose a place where there wasn't enough water to drown a cat, you——" He didn't say what, which was just as well perhaps. "Givin' a fellow a wetting enough to make him ketch his death, fishing you out again, all for nothink." He seemed quite to resent the fact of her safety. "Let me see you," he said, flashing his bull's-eye on the forlorn figure, over which Philip's heart was yearning with his chivalrous Christian tenderness. He had expected to see a younger woman, as also had Philip, whose recognition of Mrs. Wiggett was instantaneous, in spite of her present plight and absence from all that he could associate with her. Her name burst from his lips in astonishment.

"You know her, do you?" said the policeman, turning to Philip.

"What are you doing here?" asked the latter, in his turn.

No answer.

"I believe she has gone out of her mind," he whispered to the policeman. "I know her for an honest man's wife, and will take charge of her, if you like."

"Honest man's wife or no, she must come along to the station with me," replied the policeman.

"No, no!" shrieked the woman, struggling as he took hold of her to lead her away.

The cry went to Philip's heart, as did every cry of distress he ever heard. "I will take her home," he pleaded.

"No, I'm 'sponsible for her now," answered the man, more civilly. "I wouldn't be doing my duty if I let her go. She might try it on again."

Philip felt that this was true, and urged him no further. "I will go and let her husband know," said he.

"Don't tell *him*!" she cried. "Let him take me, but don't tell Timothy."

Philip was more than ever convinced that Mrs. Wiggett had gone out of her mind, and in that condition had run away from home.

Dark and bitter as the night was, he resolved to take the train to the nearest station, and warn the good gardener of his wife's fate.

The snow had ceased to fall, and the stars were out in the frosty sky, as Philip walked from the station to Hurst, and walked back again, almost immediately, with Mr. Wiggett, silent and sorrowful, by his side. It was midnight before they reached London, and Philip left his companion, as he seemed to desire, and hastened home. As he crossed the road to enter the court, a carriage drew up just before him. In stopping, the horse slipped on the ice, and fell. It was Philip who helped to raise it. But just as it got on its feet the horse made a sudden start forward, and one of the shafts of the carriage struck him on the chest and knocked him down, and, before it could be backed sufficiently, the still startled animal had planted a foot on the prostrate form, and Philip became insensible.



## CHAPTER XXXVIII.

### IN THE HOSPITAL.

**I**T is the best thing he can do," repeated Mr. Carrington, when he returned and found the injured man bent on going to the hospital. "My mother's carriage will return in a few minutes. I will take you there myself," he added, turning to Philip. "I am a governor, or something of that sort, I believe, of St. George's, and I happen to know the house surgeon there."

Philip expressed his thanks. He lay on the sofa in great pain, but with an expression of perfect sweetness on his pallid face. The cloud was lifted from his spirit. The bodily suffering had chased it quite away, and restored the inward peace, which made it triumphant over pain. He had already lost sight of the accident, and had yielded himself through the mystery of suffering into the hands of his Father in heaven.

"You will let one of the boys," he said to Mary, speaking with difficulty, "you will let one of the boys go to my place to-morrow, and let them know what has happened."

She promised that it should be as he wished. Bob should go in the morning, as he went to his work.

"Is there anything that I can do?" asked Mr. Carrington, eagerly.

Philip shook his head, and thanked him.

"This will throw you out of work, will it not?" He was about to say that he would gladly compensate him for the money lost, but something checked him. A whisper from Esther had sufficed to let him know who Philip was. He remembered her enthusiastic account of him two years ago. In his present state of mind, it would probably have prejudiced him against Philip but that there was something in the latter which attracted him powerfully.

"My people will take me on again as soon as I am able to work," was the reply.

"Have you any friends with whom I could communicate?" asked Mr. Carrington again.

Once more Philip shook his head, this time somewhat sadly, and Mary answered for him: "Mr. Ward has no relations."

There was nothing to be done but to wait for the coming of the carriage, and they passed the rest of the time almost in silence. Esther had performed a slight ceremony of introduction between Mr. Carrington and her mother; but they were all suffering from the shock of the accident, and the silence was less embarrassing than it would otherwise have been. Philip, indeed, seemed the least concerned among them.

At length the carriage arrived. Philip held out his hand to Mary, and said, "Good-bye;" then he turned to Esther, who held out her hand to him. He took it, and retained it in his for a moment. "I may not get over this," he said. "If you hear that I am dying, will you come and see me—let me see you—for the last time?"

In great suffering the body often seems to become more transparent. Philip's look at that moment was transparent enough. Mr. Carrington managed to slip into the background.

"I will—I will," said Esther, bursting into tears. "It

is all my fault that you are hurt. If I had not gone out this evening it would not have happened. What had I to do with the gaieties of the world any more——?”

“Hush!” he said, gently patting her as one might a child, and leaving her weeping on her mother’s shoulder. Mr. Carrington had no opportunity of saying good-night, even, he only bowed to Mary as he passed over the narrow threshold, saying to Philip, “Take my arm,” and leading him to the carriage.

They were soon at the hospital, and obtained without delay an interview with the house surgeon, who found on examination that Philip was suffering from the fracture of two of his ribs, and an injury to the lungs, which was the cause of the hæmorrhage. He was admitted at once, and almost immediately conducted to a small surgical ward, undressed, and put to bed, and the necessary remedies applied with wonderful celerity. Mr. Carrington did not leave the hospital till he had seen him comfortably settled for the night.

“Thank you for all your kindness,” said Philip, holding out his hand to Carrington—a hand which the latter noticed was hardened and distorted by labour, and not, to his fastidious eyes, too clean. The engrained soil of his smithy work was not easily washed off.

“You have very little to thank me for,” replied Carrington; “but I hope you are comfortable for the night.”

“I am quite happy,” murmured Philip, dreamily. And then rousing himself a little, he added, “If you only knew how happy! I had lost my hold on life and peace, and through this suffering I have found it again. If you know what I had lost, you will know that I welcome the pain through which God has seen fit to restore me.”

If he had been talking Sanscrit he could not have been more unintelligible than he was to Benjamin Carrington;

but the latter felt that this man was speaking of a reality as great and palpable as life itself, if he could have entered into it. He had known no living soul with this spirit of life in it. But receiving a warning from the attendant, he said, simply, "I will come and see you to-morrow," and withdrew.

On the way home his thoughts reverted to Esther. He longed to take her out of those surroundings, which seemed to him, in spite of himself, intolerably mean and poor. In spite of himself, for he both professed and desired to judge differently, and to despise the judgment of the world in which he moved, whose standards of life and happiness were things of outward circumstance. And yet he was the very slave of them. He had seen plainly enough on Philip's transparent face the look of tender and passionate admiration, but he had felt no jealousy. It seemed quite natural that he should feel thus towards her. He, Benjamin Carrington, was too generous to think it a presumption on Philip's part. It seemed quite natural, too, that Esther should compassionate the poor fellow—that she should shed tears at the thought of his dying of his hurt. He loved her all the more for those tears. But as for her loving Philip, the idea never entered his head ; and in his present state of mind, in spite of his generosity, in spite of his theories of equality, he would have recoiled from it as a species of degradation ; so potent is prejudice, the prejudice that is sucked in with the mother's milk. He was quite capable of reasoning differently ; quite capable of admiring Philip's noble and beautiful character, even to his own depreciation ; quite capable of saying to himself, "What a miserable fellow I, Benjamin Carrington, am, compared with this man." But at present he was not reasoning, but feeling, and feeling very pleasantly too. He indulged all the way home in a delightful dream of the future, in which he was lavishing upon his beautiful Esther all the good things which

philosophically he held so lightly. He fought his way to high position, and shared it with her; to unbounded wealth, of which she was the joint administrator; to social distinction, of which she was the adornment and the centre. He felt himself glowing with a new energy under the stimulus of his dreams, and the new energy and delight increased the ardour of his love. In this frame of spirit he came home to find his lady mother in her most querulous mood.

"How late you are!" she exclaimed on seeing him; "I am quite worn out sitting up for you."

"Why did you not go to bed at once? I am sorry you have tired yourself," he answered, kindly.

"I could not go to bed till I knew that you were safe," she rejoined.

"Safe!" he exclaimed, laughing; "I have not been in danger."

"You never know what danger you may be in with characters like those."

Mr. Carrington knew that his mother would persist in supposing that Philip was some sort of a highwayman, and that there was no use in arguing the point with her.

"What has detained you all this while?" she asked, in an injured tone.

"I took the poor fellow to the hospital," he replied.

"Not in the carriage, I hope!" she exclaimed, with real horror.

"Why not? He is a most respectable young workman, whom we may have injured for life unknowingly," replied her son.

"How could you do such a thing?" the old lady burst forth, indignantly. "A man picked up off the street! Why I shall have to send it away at once to be cleaned. I can never use it again."



"Mother, I fancy it has never been so highly honoured, and may never be again," he replied, in a gentle voice. But seeing that she whom he addressed was very like to cry over her spoilt carriage, he began to soothe her with commonplaces.

When he left her for the night his bright dreams had faded as by magic. The hard cynicism, which seemed impossible an hour ago, had crept over him. Life lay before him, dull, meaningless—a mockery.





## CHAPTER XXXIX.

### TIMOTHY'S TROUBLE.

**H**AVING spent the night in confinement, Mrs. Sarah Wiggett was brought up the next morning before the police magistrate of the district, charged with having attempted to commit suicide. The unhappy creature had spent the night in sleepless misery. Her ill-regulated mind would not allow her to think of the doom she had escaped and all its awful consequences; she only lamented that she had been unable to carry out her purpose. The thought of her husband would present itself, but only to torment her. "What am I but a curse to him?" she wailed, in her cell. "Why was I ever born? Why was I not permitted to die?"

Timothy, too, had spent a sleepless night. He had walked up and down before the station-house for more than an hour, and then he had betaken himself to a publichouse on the other side of the street, where "beds" were advertised, and had hired one for the night, but without the least intention of occupying it. He made sure that the bedroom was to the front of the house, and then taking possession of it, he locked the door, put out the light, and sat down at the window without so much as taking off his hat. He had a stout walking-stick with him, and grasping it with both his hands, he bent his broad back and leant his chin upon them. It was an attitude of dogged determination—

determination to suffer and make no sign. From where he sat he could see the lamps which lighted the station, and from the building he hardly ever lifted his eyes all night long. He never lifted them, but they sometimes closed in spite of him, and he would nod forward on his stick, and fix them more resolutely than before. What passed through his mind that night was not wholly articulate. Under the like circumstances it would hardly have been so with a mind much more accustomed to consequent trains of thought than his. A dumb sense of shame and misery pressed upon him.

Morning came, it seemed to him quite swiftly, and before he was prepared to meet it. His thoughts became more clear to him. Close at hand was the (to him) terrible ordeal of appearing in court, of undergoing an examination. The big brown man's sensitive and shy nature felt as outraged in anticipation as any woman's about to be exposed to some public shame. He had no manner of doubt that every incident of his life would be revealed. He had married another man's wife while that man was still living; it would be brought up against him without doubt. His awe of the tribunals of his country was of the same kind—only a great deal more definite and real—as the awe with which he had been taught to regard the judgment-seat of God, and it is to be feared that he applied to the latter the same arbitrary and legal procedure which ruled in the former, and which was something quite apart from ordinary human justice.

At length he found himself in the court-house, among the set of ragamuffins who usually assemble there, friends and companions of the drunken and disorderly crew who, day after day, appear before the magistrates of a London district court. He took his seat among them, stared at for his superior respectability, his neighbours, no doubt, specu-

lating on the chance he would have afforded them, under any other circumstance, of relieving him of the bulky pocket-book which generally accompanies men of his build and appearance. Several cases came on, and were disposed of, the only one which roused Timothy's attention being a case of wife-beating, in which a miserable-looking little woman was dragged up against a great hulking fellow, only to plead for him that it was all a mistake, that he was drunk when he gave her the blow which had disfigured her poor face, and that he was the best of husbands when sober—which she did not add he hardly ever was. As the man went out of court, having entered into his own recognisances to keep the peace, Timothy made a face at him which would have justified the magistrate in holding him to the same, and groaned out, "Scoundrel!" between his teeth.

The next case was his own. There was his wife, led forward by a policeman, kindly enough, and yet to see him touch her arm made the strong man shiver. He rose in his place, thereby directing attention to himself as connected with the case. Then he sat down again, stretching out his arms on the bench before him, and taking up the room of three men. Those about him would have been rude, but seeing he was "in it," they cheerfully gave way to him. His wife had not seen him, and her back was turned towards him now. But a lock of disordered grey hair fell from under her bonnet, and caused Timothy's big heart to heave with a hardly suppressed sob. Then he frowned heavily, and sat looking as lowering and furtive as if he had committed some horrible crime. The policeman gave his evidence clearly. He had seen her loitering about the bridge; then he had missed her, and happening to pass a flight of steps leading down to the river, but without thinking of her, he had directed his lantern that way; it was his custom as he passed the place, which was often occupied

on fine nights by young vagrants. Just then she flung herself in. The tide was low—at its lowest ebb—otherwise she might have been drowned—might have struck her head on the covered steps, and been floated away insensible. There wasn't water to drown her then, but she had struggled to get away and go further in; seemed very determined; did not appear to be in drink. Met a young man who seemed to know her, and who thought she was a little wrong; and the policeman touched his forehead significantly.

The magistrate then asked if there was any evidence to show what had led her to make such a determined attempt on her life, and spoke a few words to her on the culpability of the act, from the consequences of which she had been mercifully saved. But Sarah Wiggett did not answer, and the magistrate was about to remand her, when the policeman, to whom Timothy had spoken the night before, informed him that the woman's husband was in court. Timothy stood up in his place, ready to brave the worst.

The magistrate looked at him sternly. He was accustomed to brutal husbands, and he thought, "Very likely, though he belongs to a higher class than that last wretched wife-beater, he has driven this poor woman mad with his cruelty." Everybody began to look at Timothy sternly, and certainly he looked black enough to justify their suspicions. His face was drawn into a dreadful frown, the effect of perplexity and suppressed emotion, the corners of his large mouth went down almost to his cravat, and his colour was nearly purple.

The magistrate asked him to come forward. He obeyed, sullenly it seemed. He answered one or two simple questions in the same manner. Sarah had covered her face with her hands as soon as she heard his name, but at length she could bear it no longer. "Oh, Timothy! what have I done?" she cried.

Timothy's face got darker and more dreadful than ever, quite murderous looking, and suddenly it relaxed, and the great tears rolled down his cheeks. "My poor Sally! what made ye do such a thing as this?"

"Are you willing to take charge of your wife?" asked the magistrate, more gently. "She must be looked after, and treated with great consideration and kindness."

"Who said he has ever treated me with anything but kindness?" burst forth the little woman, turning on the magistrate defiantly. "He's the best and kindest husband that ever lived, and I've been nothing but a trouble to him all my life."

"Well, well, my good woman; be calm now, and go home and do better for the future."

Here the policeman whispered Timothy to thank his worship, and take his wife away; which he did, holding her by the hand as if she had been a child, and only breathing freely when he found himself once more in the open air.

None of his fears had been realised, and so far he was thankful enough; but a feeling of having been disgraced clung to him—a feeling of having been driven out of the paradise of respectability. They were in the street together. He thought everybody looked at them; and probably they did, for the big man still held his small wife's hand, and both looked agitated and disordered. He hailed the first cab that came up, and they got into it and were driven to the station. But Sarah did not sit by her husband's side. In spite of his entreaties, she crouched down at his feet, and wept there.

"Let me alone," she cried; "I am better here; this will do me good."

"But it is doing me harm, Sally. If you go on like this I'll never get over it. We must keep up appearances."

And to this argument Sarah Wiggett rose and sat beside

her husband, and made an attempt to look as if nothing had happened, and so to put on the outward show of unimpeached and unimpeachable respectability. And she in this succeeded better than Timothy did. His brow would gloom, and the corners of his mouth would droop persistently into the expression of what he felt himself to be—a man broken down and disgraced. Sarah knew how heavy the trouble must be which weighed down a spirit so happy as his, and the knowledge filled her with wholesome remorse—wholesome, for it took her out of herself, and from the contemplation of her own sufferings, and thus broke the bonds of selfish misery which had bound her. As she glanced at him from time to time she became more and more rational and subdued.

At the station she went into a waiting-room to arrange her dress and to gain a few minutes' time to think. What a ghastly face it was which confronted her in the mirror, all the more ghastly for the cheeks, which looked painted with their hectic flush! Still, according to Timothy's wish, she made the best of herself, like any ordinary happy woman. And all the while Timothy stood, like a sentinel at his post, outside the waiting-room door. He evidently did not like to lose sight of her; she was a charge committed to him. He felt a dim sense of some awful responsibility resting upon him.

When she came out, looking quite calm and respectable, with a veil down over the haggard face, he handed her into the refreshment-room, and they had a cup of tea together. It was the first time either of them had broken their fast that day. There had been very little said by either since the time when they first entered the cab. There lay between them the one unapproachable subject—unapproachable at least to one of them—the cause of all their misery. Not a word did Timothy say about it, not a word did he

intend to say, come what would. But Sarah had made up her mind to speak, and put an end to it.

"Timothy," she began, as soon as they stood upon the platform, "hadn't you better send me away at once?"

"Away—where?" he asked, bewildered, his mind working slowly round to her meaning afterwards.

"Your house isn't the place for me any more," she said, sadly.

"As long as I have a house it's your place, Sally," he replied, evasively.

"You know what I mean," she rejoined, with something of her old impatience. "I have no right to be there, and you know it."

He would not look at her, he would not appear to understand.

She came very close to him, and stood on tiptoe as she hissed rather than whispered, "You know you met Ned Brown yesterday."

He started. "Then you know, too, and that's what's done it." He meant that it had driven her to make the attempt to drown herself.

She was silent.

"Sally," he said, sorrowfully, "it was hard on me, you doin' it. If you couldn't trust in the Lord, you might have trusted in me; and if you had trusted in me, you would have been able to trust in Him." He said it in all reverence. It was, perhaps, the first pious utterance of his life, and, strange as it sounded, it was profoundly true. He was doing his best to teach her that higher trust by making the lower easy to her dwarfed and stunted nature.

"I've had no peace day or night ever since I heard that false report of Ned's death. But for this I might have been a different woman;" and she wrung her hands together beneath the folds of her cloak. "I promise never to try



that again for your sake," she added. "But you'll let me go now; I'll get my own bread quietly somewhere or other, and I'll try to be a better woman."

"Come along home, Sally," said Timothy, hoarsely. "That's our train there."

"I'll come to serve you, Timothy," she replied, in a whisper, and added, "it's more than I deserve."





## CHAPTER XL.

### A DISCUSSION.

**W**HEN Mr. Carrington met his mother at the breakfast-table in the morning, it was evident that she had not recovered from her annoyance about the carriage. She was inclined to be fretful and displeased. But her son was not, on that particular morning—as sometimes happens even with the best of sons—in the mood to put up with her displeasure; and, fortunately, she knew when and where to stop. When he was going he said, simply, and without any introduction of the subject—

“Mother, I wish you would call upon Miss ——” he hesitated at the name a moment, and then repeated, firmly—“Miss Potter to-day.” The old lady elevated her eyebrows. “She was very much agitated by last night’s accident,” he added.

“Very well,” replied Mrs. Carrington, in her usual tone. And she meant to do what he requested. She had every confidence in her own ability to conduct herself in any situation requiring difficult social tactics. Besides, she was not quite sure that she did not admire Esther sufficiently to covet her for a daughter after all. If the thing was impossible, owing to Esther’s relations, she had only to let matters take their course; a little obstacle here and another there would be quite sufficient. A vulgar mother-in-law in prospect might be suffered to cross his path and deter him; and

then Constance, clever, cultivated, and refined, could be kept at hand to help to wean him—Constance, whom the old lady half suspected of an affection for her son, though it was well veiled in the frankness of an old friendship, far better veiled than it would have been by any amount of assumed coldness and reserve.

Benjamin Carrington passed the day in the ordinary routine of his profession, but he bent his steps westward at an unusually early hour, and took his way to St. George's Hospital. His mood was the listless and dreary one which had prevailed with him of late. Life seemed quite devoid of sweetness and of joy to this young man, on whom every good gift of nature and of fortune appeared to have been lavished. In that mood of his nothing seemed worth doing, nothing worth gaining in the universe.

The scene Benjamin Carrington was about to enter was not one calculated to raise his spirits. Our cynic could not bear the sight of suffering, and there it was, concentrated in its most palpable and horrible shape, in bruised, and broken, and prostrate human forms. Philip had been put into a small ward devoted to surgical cases, and these chiefly accidental. There were one or two broken legs and a broken arm, an amputation being necessary in one case, and disablement for life impending in another; while in the next bed lay a little lad who had been badly burnt about the face and neck, and whose mournful eyes looked out of the midst of the dismal white bandages which still swathed the rest of his countenance. It is strange how sad human eyes are apart from the rest of the face, sad as the eyes of the beasts, that are always pleading or reproachful.

Carrington made his way to Philip's side without looking round. The latter, lying comparatively at ease, saw him enter the ward, and his pale face lighted up with its brilliant smile as his visitor drew near. Carrington looked by far

the most melancholy of the two, as he stepped up to the bed and asked after the welfare of its occupant.

"I hope you are not suffering much," he said.

"Not much," answered Philip, with another smile.

"Are you comfortable here?" asked Carrington, sitting down beside him and glancing round with a shudder.

"Quite," was the answer—"quite happy."

Carrington looked at him in amazement. It seemed simply incredible that this man should be happy. It was probably a misuse of language. But no, the beaming look told of a fulness of content such as he had never known.

"I wish I knew the secret," said Carrington, half to himself.

"It is easily learnt," replied Philip; "live by faith."

"Fanaticism," thought his listener. "Well, if it makes him happy, it is all right, poor fellow."

"You must not speak much, I suppose," he said aloud.

"I shall come and see you again and we will talk it over."

"I can speak, if you can hear," said Philip, eagerly. "I know what you are thinking."

"What am I thinking?"

"You are thinking that I am only indulging in a very pleasant dream, which you would not disturb for the world."

"You have guessed pretty closely," said Carrington; "I like to keep hold of the facts of a case."

"Well, my happiness is a fact; just as much a fact as my pain, and poverty, and friendlessness."

"I admit that," said Carrington, entering into the disquisition with warmth; "it is the foundation of it I question. It is grounded on some future hope which may prove——"

"Only a dream," said Philip, concluding the sentence for him; and adding earnestly, "no; it is grounded on a present reality—on the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

The face of his listener expressed, along with a yearning desire to enter into sympathy with the words of the speaker, the utter blank of inability to do so.

"You go far to convince one of the reality of this life of faith," he said, "since you hold fast to it in the face of such facts as your present experience furnishes; but could you not imagine a depth of wretchedness in which you would lose hold of it?"

"No, and yet yes," Philip answered. "I had lost it; but not on account of pain or wretchedness. This present suffering of mine restored me to it. God does not forsake those who put their trust in Him."

"All things happen alike to all," muttered Carrington.

"That in itself is a ground of confidence," said Philip.

"I do not see it," said his visitor.

"If you cannot trust God for others, you cannot trust Him for yourself."

"I feel that most strongly," replied Carrington.

"Look round here," said Philip; "you see nothing but suffering."

"Does it distress you?" asked his visitor, hastily. "I could not remain here; the mental suffering of witnessing all that goes on here would overpower me; and you shall not remain if you desire to get away from it."

"It does not distress me," answered Philip; "at least, not as it would distress you, I dare say." Philip spoke with pauses between his sentences, and the expressive face of Benjamin Carrington showed some disappointment at the last. He was indeed feeling: "Here is the horrible flaw which I have always found in the few efforts I have made to understand religious people. Here crops out that dreadful self-complacency, contradicting all that has gone before."

But Philip went on: "I know that every sufferer is

in God's hands, even as I am. If I were not called to suffer with them, I would be called to save them from their sufferings. I would feel the divine impulse to heal, and help, and save?"

"But suppose neither you nor they were to be saved from their sufferings?" said Carrington.

"I can't suppose that," replied Philip. "If you mean that I might be left, all the while trusting in God, to perish of hunger, or to endure any last extremity of ill, that might very well be; but I should be saved from my suffering all the same, not only when death came to put an end to it, but so long as I could hold on to the belief that it was all consistent with His love."

"And then?"

"And then, though unconscious of the fact, I would still be sustained, even to the end; till the great deliverance came."

"You put the world of faith and the world of fact quite apart, it seems to me."

"No; they are always together, the one within, the other without us."

"But what hope for the world have you here?" asked Carrington.

"Boundless hope!" replied Philip, with kindling eagerness.

"In what does it lie?"

"In this: that every soul in which there is this life is bound to communicate it."

"How?"

"You know the life of Christ?"

Carrington bowed a reverent assent.

"By living as He lived," rejoined Philip; "I mean actually, not spiritually."

"It is impossible," said Carrington.

"Have you tried?"

Carrington acknowledged that he had not.

"I think," said Philip, nearly exhausted, and sinking back on his pillow, "that you are like the young man of whom it is written that *He* looked on him and loved him."

But at this point a nurse approached and warned Mr. Carrington that his stay had been sufficiently protracted, and on this he rose and took his leave, promising to come again on the morrow.









"The school was rising for dismissal."



## CHAPTER XLI.

### TACTICS TRIUMPHANT.

**T**HE school was rising for dismissal. Esther stood at the door, while square after square of little ones rose from their seats, fell into single file, and went past her, each with a curtsy, and many with a smile, which showed how much they loved their teacher, and what an influence she had begun to exercise on their childish hearts and ways. And that teacher had an answering smile for every smile of theirs. Those fortunate little scholars never knew what it was to encounter a frowning face, which is to children what a sunless, dark, and bitter day is to the growing plants, and which, if turned upon them always, will blight their unformed affections as surely as that will blight the blossoms, and kill the promise of the year. Grave enough Esther often was over their faults and carelessnesses, but never angry with the sinful, selfish anger which some teachers and some parents show, thereby committing the first and greatest of offences—that against the little ones. Esther made their school-time a happy time to her little scholars, as Mary had done before her, and consequently her teaching was to her a happy task. She felt the truth of the poet's lines,—

“All other joys go less,  
To the great joy of doing kindnesses.”

And the constant necessity for kindnesses made a stream of refreshing pass daily through her life. The life is sure to be a barren one in which, either from within or from without, such a necessity is not felt or is not satisfied.

And the day had been a more than usually happy and successful day in the school-room, so that Esther was looking neither sad nor weary when she entered the home parlour, whither Mary had preceded her by half an hour. It was well that she found such delight in her work, for both cares and trials awaited her at home. There was the pretty constant pressure of money anxieties, for though the school had prospered beyond expectation, it was still "little to earn," and there were "many to keep." Her elder brothers helped bravely, and gave up their earnings unmurmuringly to the common fund, but the younger ones were not yet gaining enough for themselves; while the two children were at home with Sarah—the patient, unselfish Sarah, whose services as maid-of-all-work were absolutely necessary. As for the twins, they held together, and apart from all the rest, more and more. They doled out a portion of their earnings to their mother, and retained the rest for dress and other purposes of their own. Day by day they became more selfish and more unlovely, and were often a source of uneasiness to Mary, and of strife in the family, the brothers Martin and Willie especially resenting their conduct.

And now they were about to suffer the consequences of their ill-temper and selfishness. They were clever work-women, and had been more than once retained when others would have been sent away; but Emily had been insufferably impertinent to the head of the establishment in which they now worked for weekly wages, and she had been dismissed on the spot. In Agnes's department they happened to be more than usually busy, and calculating on the effect

which she could produce—she had tried the same thing before, and with success—she also threw up her situation, saying she would not remain if her sister was sent away. But this time her calculation failed, and the establishment dispensed with the services of both.

They had remained at home already one whole week, and were likely to remain longer; and that very morning Martin had told them, somewhat harshly, that they would have to pay their board out of the money they had saved, well knowing they had saved nothing. “If it had been share and share alike with us,” said the lad, “it would have been another thing.” Whereupon they had retorted that they were surely to be trusted for a week or two’s board and lodging in their mother’s house; and that, if not, they knew where they would be, and were quite ready to go. All of which made poor Mary feel that her troubles with her children were but beginning.

The twins were therefore in no very pleasant mood. Indeed, that afternoon they seemed bent on making themselves disagreeable, especially to Esther, whom the two lads regarded with warm affection, which was always veiled in a touching respect, as if they could never forget that she was a lady, and in some sort a stranger.

The grievance of the morning had been under discussion, and Esther saw that her mother’s eyes were red with weeping. Tea was already on the table, but Mary left the room, conscious of the traces of tears, and anxious to efface them, and Esther began gently to remonstrate with her sisters, as she had already successfully remonstrated with Martin.

But Emily and Agnes were in no state of mind to bear remonstrance, however gentle. They burst forth simultaneously with a torrent of foolish, angry abuse. Esther was thoroughly ashamed of them, and as she stood depre-

cating their loud and vulgar tones, the door opened, and, preceded by Constance Vaughan, Mrs. Carrington sailed into the room.

Esther could not help feeling and looking mortified and confused. Emily and Agnes, still muttering wrathfully, brushed rudely past the visitors. The very room was out of sorts. It was littered with the materials on which the girls had been exercising their skill for their own behoof. Esther had to make room for Mrs. Carrington by clearing away a heap of millinery from the shabby sofa, and she could see that the lady looked twice before she committed herself to such a seat.

The visit was anything but a comfortable one. All were equally constrained and miserable. It was far worse with Esther than anything which Mrs. Carrington's imagination had been bold enough to conceive. The girls were in the highest degree objectionable, what could their mother be? It was in vain that Constance afterwards assured her that Mary was charming—a calm, beautiful woman—a lady by right of nature; she could not believe it.

“And that untidy girl who opened the door for us was her sister, too,” she would answer, “and that dirty child her brother! There seemed to me no end of them. If Esther had been a girl of spirit she would never have remained among them.”

Sarah, and little Johnny, as he was still called, though the epithet was becoming inappropriate enough, had made their appearance after the unfortunate visit had come to a close. Mrs. Carrington, with Constance by her side, was half way towards the entrance of the court, when the former missed her parasol. Quick in all her movements, she returned to find it, and encountered these other two objectionable personages disputing over the parasol. Esther made her appearance in the doorway as Sarah was saying

to Mrs. Carrington, "I was coming after you with the parasol your daughter left."

The toy seemed too small and gay for the elder lady in Sarah's estimation, and the manners of the latter, not accustomed to servitude, were, perhaps, a little too free.

"The parasol is mine," she said, haughtily ; and, looking over Sarah's head, she added, bowing to Esther, with a meaning and too amiable smile, "and the young lady is not my daughter just yet."

The smile, and the two monosyllables, said plainly, "But I hope she soon will be."

Mrs. Carrington came off with flying colours, to her own complete satisfaction. She was quite pathetic over the fate of Esther among her terrible relations. If she had been paying a visit to a den of wild beasts she could not have described herself as more shocked and appalled.





## CHAPTER XLII.

### SNOWDROPS.

**D**AY after day found Mr. Carrington by Philip's bed, and there sprang up between them that rare, and as some think impossible, thing between two persons of different grades of society, a true friendship. In spite of his democratical opinions, Benjamin Carrington had very strong social antipathies, a thing by no means uncommon, and which does more to keep the different classes apart than anything else. He was ready enough to deplore the separation between rich and poor, but he was not at all ready to put up with vulgarity, or rudeness, or any kind of obtrusiveness. He found none of these things in Philip, however, and for once his practice kept pace with his creed. One day he was deploring the widening of the breach between class and class, and remarked that "it was to some extent a question of manners," when Philip surprised him by saying that that, in its turn, was a question of morals.

"The gentleness, the courtesy, even the personal purity, which you find lacking in us," he added, with a smile, "would all be supplied by a higher spirit of morality; not the morality of mere respectability, which is impotent and worse than impotent, but the self-sacrificing morality of the Gospel."

"We may have all these things, and I don't deny that

they are good, and yet have nothing of the corresponding spirit," rejoined Carrington.

"In your class, but not in ours," said Philip.

"Then your class, you think, might be the greatest of all in virtue as it is in numbers," said Carrington.

"I mean nothing less than that; I can believe nothing less," said Philip.

"Perhaps you are right," replied Carrington. "The man who does not work can hardly be said to live."

He had also led Philip to talk of himself, and had learned by degrees the whole of his history—the history he had already disclosed to Esther.

"What will you do when you come out, still, probably, unfit for work? You will let me send you away till you are quite strong, without feeling under any obligation?" said Carrington, questioningly.

Philip had flushed a little, and looked uneasy.

"I confess I do not like to lie under a money obligation," he replied; "but I will not scruple to apply to you for a small loan till I can repay it out of my regular earnings."

"Pardon me," said Carrington, "but in your position surely you ought to try and save."

"Do you think it is right to secure yourself and see others perish?" asked Philip. "If I had a wife and little ones it would be otherwise."

"But you might come to form ties of your own," said Carrington.

"You mean marry? No, I will never marry. It is not for me. Every man must judge for himself. I would have to give up everything, and devote myself to wife and children. I question no man's right to do so, only I deny my own. Had you seen as much of the life of the millions as I have seen, you would deny it too."

"Your Christianity is not an easy one," said Carrington.



"It is easy to believe and hard to practise," said Philip.

"And the current form of it is just the reverse," replied Carrington, smiling. "It is very hard to believe, and wonderfully easy to practise."

Carrington used to come away from these conferences, which went on, and almost in whispers, by Philip's bed, a changed being. He was catching the fire of Philip's enthusiasm. He was kindling his spirit at that flame.

Esther's name had not been mentioned between them, when one day, after Philip had been pronounced fairly convalescent, Carrington, sitting by him, saw a bright and tender light flash into his face—that pale and clear-cut face, which his illness had made paler and clearer than ever. The light was like that of a sudden sunshine on the face of a hill which has been lying in shadow, and Carrington turned his head instinctively to see what had brought it there.

It was Esther who had entered, and was now coming towards them, her little sister by her side. Philip held out his hand, first to the child and then to her, and she took the place from which Carrington stood aside after exchanging with the latter a simple greeting.

Little Mary had carried in her hand a bunch of snowdrops. "They are for you," she said, placing them in Philip's hand.

"And where did you get them, Fairy?" he said, thanking her.

"Esther got them for you," said the truth-telling Mary.

"I bring you a message from a friend," said Esther, cutting short the further thanks on Philip's lip, on which Carrington noticed a quivering of emotion. "You are coming out on Saturday next, are you not?"

"I believe I am," he replied.

"Mr. Wiggett will be here waiting for you," said Esther,

"and if you will stay with him for a few weeks he will be glad to have you."

"Mr. Carrington has been kindly thinking of me," said Philip, looking towards the latter.

"Mr. Wiggett is a market-gardener at Hurst," explained Esther; "he has a very pretty house quite close to the Vaughans. You must have seen it often in your rides. He has just lost his wife."

"Is the poor woman dead?" cried Philip, interrupting her.

"Yes, and he is sadly cast down. It would do him good to have you with him. Little Mary here is going too, and," she added, frankly, "I will be near at hand during the Easter holidays."

Mr. Carrington had stood aside while this was going on.

"The place is lovely in spring-time," he remarked.

"You will go, will you not?" asked Esther.

"Yes; I will go," he answered. "I never had so many offers of kindness in my life," he added, looking again at Mr. Carrington.

It was settled at length that Mr. Wiggett should call for Philip at two o'clock on Saturday, and then Esther took her leave. Mr. Carrington did the same, and accompanied her into the street.

"Will you allow me to see you home?" he said.

"With pleasure," she replied; "but there is no necessity. I have become quite used to going about alone, or only with my little sister here."

It had not struck him that there was anything peculiar in Esther visiting a sick man in an hospital; for whatever she did she had the faculty of doing so that it seemed the only thing to be done, so that by the side of Philip's bed she seemed as welcome and as little out of place as a sick-nurse, though looking more like the goddess of health; but suddenly he remembered that it was a thing which no

young lady would have been allowed to do, and the thought vexed and annoyed him beyond measure. He could not bear to think that there should be any flaw in her ladyhood, though he would have been the first to denounce the conventional restraints in which it is vainly imagined to consist.

"I hope you are not becoming emancipated," he said.

Something in his manner displeased her.

"Emancipated from what?" she said, gravely; "I am getting quite emancipated from idleness and frivolity, I hope. In the class to which I belong one woman cannot be spared to look after another."

There was a slight ring of scorn in her voice, which her companion was keenly alive to.

"You seem perfectly satisfied with your lot," he said, "and I have often thought it such a hard one."

He was trying to approach again to that sympathy on the very verge of tenderness, which had been so easily established at the Wests' party; but he felt himself repulsed. Esther was beside him, but cold, haughty, unapproachable. She placed at once an infinite distance between them. He could not otherwise account for her change of manner than by thinking that she had detected the latent tenderness in his tone and manner, and was resolved on repressing it—and the supposition was correct.

"I should always have required abundance of occupation and interest," she replied; "and I would not exchange my present lot for that of any woman I have known."

"She at least is not mercenary," thought Carrington, dismally; "but then she clearly cares not a straw for me."

"I shall say good-bye here, Mr. Carrington," said Esther as they turned into Belgrave Road, and long before she had reached home. "Remember me to Constance."

He said good-bye at once, with grave politeness, and went his way sadly.

"No wonder she does not care for an ineffectual fellow like me," he thought. "What have I ever done that she should care for me?" Then the thought started up suddenly, "Does she care for him?"—for Philip. He remembered the sweetness of her face, the sweetness which had passed out of it in talking to him. Then he remembered the little bunch of snowdrops concerning which little Mary had told the truth, and the memory of the cool white flowers was like drops of fire.





## CHAPTER XLIII.

### DRIFTING APART.

**Y**OUNG Mrs. West was beginning to suffer terribly, and the complaint under which she suffered—only a too common one—was the suppression of the best part of her nature, and the consciousness that her life was sinking down to a lower level, and becoming, instead of fuller and nobler, infinitely emptier and meaner. She was active, both bodily and mentally, both by nature and by a conscientious training, and her lot was now one of supreme idleness. She was benevolent, with all her love of splendour and luxury, and she was doing good to nobody. Had she but known it, hard work and self-denial were the tonics her vigorous nature needed, and under which its faults would have been eliminated. But even if she had known this, it would have been difficult to import these things into her life. Harry was utterly unsympathising, and these tonics required the sustenance of sympathy. He was quite incapable of feeling the life-weariness, the dissatisfaction with self, which comes to all deeper natures at times, even in the best of circumstances. He had no craving to make his life a better and nobler thing, no desire to benefit his fellow-creatures, though he would not have done harm to the meanest of them, unless they had come in his way very much indeed, and then he would have swept them aside and thought no

more about them. He could not understand Kate wishing that he should begin to do something with his life. He laughed at her idea of going down to Oxford or Cambridge, and living there for a year or two as students. "I will work with you," she had said, "and you—both of us—will be better able to take a place in the world. You care for science a little, you might work at that; or you might go into Parliament, and do something there."

In none of these things had Harry the slightest concern, and he was beginning to resent her urgency as dissatisfaction with himself. He could be the reverse of amiable when he chose, or rather when Kate chose to rouse him by any expression of her uneasiness. And Kate was beginning not to choose, but to drift apart in silence. If anything disagreeable had passed between them, and visitors came in, Harry was all lightness and brightness in a moment. The deceit was not intentional, neither was it the result of the pride which throws a veil over private sores; it was simply that he was immediately distracted from his grievance, while poor Kate's once sunny face bore but too plainly the signs of discontent.

She, too, sought distraction in society, and while it was all new, and every face was fresh to him, Harry was well pleased. But he was like other people, doomed to experience how small the world is after all. He met the same people over and over again. He began to find them uninteresting, and then tiresome; they had already found him both. In their higher or deeper interests he had no share, and in the exchange of vapid opinions about things that had often no interest at all, weariness is sure to be produced.

Once and again, when wearied in this way, he had taken up the idea of going back to Australia. He was one of those people who, having very few ideas, always return to them again and again. Of this particular idea Kate had a mortal

dread. It was not much wonder that she had. She was not one of those happy wives to whom their husband's presence is their world. Kate was beginning to feel alone in the midst of a crowd, for if the one who is nearest drifts apart the outer circle widens, and leaves a dismal gulf of loneliness which can hardly be bridged over. She could not bear the thought of being separated from her father and sisters. They were dearer to her than ever. Lately Constance had been much with her, and had too surely discerned that her presence was needed. Then Kate had no dreams, such as Constance or Esther would have had, of a land of hope and promise beyond the sea. She did not care for solitudes; and great plains, covered with flocks and herds, presented to her no scope for imagining anything but the dreariest of desolations. She might be told that she could ride for days over Harry's lands and never come to anything but a shepherd's hut, and she only thought, "Then there would be no use riding at all." The idea of going to Australia was simply intolerable to her. It was a dreadful negation of all in which her life had hitherto consisted; of all in which she thought it possible for life to consist. But, as yet the idea had hardly confronted her as anything but an idea. As a possibility contained in her own life she had never regarded it for a moment. Therefore, when Harry said, in his usual careless tone, "I've been thinking over the Australian project again," Kate replied, impatiently, "Well, I wish you would not think of it."

Kate had always some bit of feminine work in hand in these morning hours, and she was throwing a little ivory shuttle through certain mysterious meshes, her jewelled fingers flashing dexterously to and fro. Harry was, as usual, walking up and down the room. Husband and wife were alone.

Nothing more was said for some time, only Kate had

doubled the swiftness of her shuttle-throwing, and the colour had heightened on her cheeks.

At length Harry stopped before her, and announced that he had made up his mind to go. "And you know when I make up my mind to a thing, I like to do it at once," he added, coolly. "I mean to go and look out a first-class ship to-day."

! Kate's hands fell into her lap as if they had been smitten with paralysis; her lips, but not her cheeks, turned pale.

"You do not mean it, Harry?" she said.

"Mean it," he repeated, "of course I do."

Their eyes met as he said this, flashed across each other like drawn swords. Kate's spirit was up, and she was about to try it against his—resolution against resolution—obstinacy against obstinacy. But Kate had been gently nurtured, and there came to her a sense of the sacred relation in which they stood to each other. She lowered her eyes, and they filled with tears. She would use all her womanly influence to turn him from his purpose; and with the good resolution came the feeling of wifely love, which had sometimes of late been in abeyance, to help her to carry it out. She threw aside her work, and rising and linking her arm in his, with her hands clasped upon it, began to walk up and down the room with him, as she had learnt to do in the first months of their marriage. But it was not easy to accomplish such a promenade in the crowded space of their drawing-room.

"There isn't room to stir here," he said, pushing aside an ottoman which stood in the way. "I am tired of this place, and the people too."

"You are tired of having nothing to do, Harry," said Kate; "let us try and find some real work in the world, and set to it humbly, and not seek our pleasure any more."

"Nothing to do!" he laughed heartily. "It is always the same with you. I don't think I'm idle!"



Harry was under the impression that he lived a very active life.

"Do not let us quarrel," she rejoined meekly: "do not let us drift apart."

"I was not thinking of quarrelling," he replied, at the same time releasing his arm from her clasp hand; shaking off her importunity, as it were.

Kate felt this, and her good resolution vanished on the spot. She walked to her chair, and resumed her work. He had not intended to be ill-natured, as he said he was not thinking of quarrelling. He kept on walking up and down, and working out the details of his plan.

"We can either let or sell this place," he said.

"That is as you please," she answered stiffly.

"We could either return in a few years, or settle out there," he went on; "there are endless improvements to be made, and plenty of room to make them. I think, for my own part, I would never care to come back. But we might come on a visit. You would like to see your father and sisters again."

Kate sat trembling with excitement. "You are not planning all this for me?" she said in a suppressed voice.

He stopped before her again, and their eyes met once more—his blue and glassy, and hard as they always were; hers flinty with resolve.

"What do you mean?" he said.

"Simply that you need not include me in your plan."

"I thought you said just now that we must not drift apart."

"And you know that I would rather die than go away from all I love."

"That's to say, you don't love me well enough to go with me," he retorted, justly enough.

She was silent.

The precious moments glided past, and in their silence these two drifted apart widely—hopelessly—for ever. Harry was full of resentment because his self-love was wounded. In a little while, during which he waited for some concession from Kate, he turned on his heel and left the room, and, soon after, Kate heard him quit the house.

And though her conscience smote her for not making such a concession, she recognised at the same time that it would have been practically useless—that it would have given her no hold over this man, that she might as well have been tied for life to a piece of machinery, kept in motion by a law of its own. Her hands in her lap, she sat there motionless as a statue, with eyes fixed on vacancy. A servant announced luncheon, and she rose mechanically, and shivered. It was still cold, and the fire had gone out, there were only ashes on the hearth.

She had noticed that the servant had looked in before, and retreated hastily.

In that time all her life had passed before her; her life at home—it seemed to her like one long summer now, with its simple duties and its constant pleasures. Why had they ever seemed insipid? Why had she longed for a larger, freer world? Her married life—with its excitements of travel and society, and its growing dissatisfaction. What was it that she wanted? Nothing certainly that wealth could buy; nothing forbidden or disallowed. She wanted to be in perfect sympathy with her own husband—her life's companion, and she could not. Her warm and rich affections withered in the hard shallow soil of his nature.

"I know what I shall do," she said to herself, as she rose from the meal at which she had made a pretence of eating. And she went upstairs, and dressing herself hurriedly, left the house to go to her father.



## CHAPTER XLIV.

### SEPARATION.

"**I**T'S Kate," exclaimed Constance, as a fly drove up to the door, and a lady got out. Her father looked up from his review, and smiled as he laid it aside to go and welcome her in the hall.

"I wonder what has brought her here to-day," thought Constance, already there, and with a dim presentiment of trouble.

Kate paid and dismissed the fly, and then turned and encountered her sister's troubled, questioning face, and glanced beyond at her father's smiling and unconscious one. A thick spangled veil was over her own, and she did not as yet trust herself to speak. She seized Constance by the hand, which she clasped and held convulsively like one in extreme pain, suffered her father to kiss her veiled forehead, and to make a little jest about its being armed with terrors, and passed into the drawing-room.

There she sank into a seat, and raised her veil with a kind of prolonged shiver.

"How cold you are," said Constance, kneeling at her feet on the hearth-rug and chafing her hands. "You are positively blue with cold. Let me take off your gloves;" and she began unbuttoning and pulling at them, her heart all the while beating fast with vague apprehension.

Mr. Vaughan even caught something of fear as he looked in his daughter's face—one of those faces that do not pale under misery, but look haggard in their brightness. Her lip quivered, but she did not speak.

"Speak to us, Kate, please speak and tell us what has happened," cried Constance, at last, unable to keep down her excitement any longer.

For answer, Kate bowed her head on to her sister's shoulder, and began to sob with dry shaking sobs.

Her father came and stood over her, and laid his hand on her gently and soothingly. "Kate, my child, what is this?" he said. "Have you quarrelled with Harry?" He could think of nothing else.

"It is worse than a quarrel," she said, raising her head and showing a face on which her father would gladly have seen childish tears.

"Has he done anything wrong?" asked her father, in real alarm; "anything which has driven you from your home?"

"This is home!" cried Kate. "Why did I ever leave it! Oh, father! will you take me back?"

"Hush, hush! my poor Kate! You do not know what you are saying," rejoined her father. "Try and be calm, and tell me what has happened."

With an effort she calmed herself, and told how Harry was resolved to go back to Australia, though he knew that she hated and dreaded it, that she had tried to turn him from his purpose and had failed; that what she wished or desired was nothing to him, that whether she went or stayed, even, seemed a matter of small moment.

"But, my child," remonstrated her father, "it is your duty to go with your husband."

"To leave you all, and never see you again, perhaps," she cried.

"If need be," he answered, and was going to add something more, when she burst forth, passionately—

"But there is no need. If he were a poor man, and had to go away to earn a living, I could bear it; but it is pure folly and selfishness, and want of concern for others."

"Kate," said her father, almost sternly, "I never thought to hear a daughter of mine say such words as these. Be loyal to your husband. Does he wish to leave you behind?"

"No," Kate was obliged to answer, "only he does not care if I stay, and he knows that if I go I shall go against my will."

"He may change his mind," said Constance, soothingly. "It may all come right yet."

"He will not change his mind," Kate replied, "or if he does, he will only come back to it again. He has gone to look out for a ship."

"Oh, Kate!" cried Constance, and she fell to weeping; while Mr. Vaughan hid his face for a moment in his hands.

"I am making you both miserable," she said, weeping herself now, at the sight of their grief.

"It is very hard, Kate, to think of your being taken from us in this way, and I do not wonder at your sorrow; but unless we can turn Harry from his purpose, we must submit to the cruel parting."

"Why must we submit to what is cruel and unjust?" she asked, with renewed passion; "why can I not return to you and be your daughter, as I was before? I would never have married him if I had thought it possible that he could drag me to that dreadful place against my will. Oh! will you not take me back?—will you not take me back?"

"This is heart-breaking, Kate. You know, child, that I would gladly have you back, but that I have no right to

take you. You want to be my daughter as you were before ; you cannot, for you are something more, you are a wife, and you cannot unmake yourself from being one. Have faith in me, my daughter. I know that the path of separation which you would choose is far, far drearier than any that you can tread by your husband's side. There are some cases in which it is better for a woman to choose this path—cases far within the limits prescribed by law, and if either body or spirit were threatened with outrage I would take you from him."

"Then you will not?" said Kate, rising as if about to go.

"You make my duty a hard one, Kate," said her father, in a broken voice ; "the hardest I have ever had to perform. Does your husband know you are here?"

"He does not," she answered, wearily.

"And he need not know," cried Constance. "Don't say any more, papa. Katie will come up to my room and rest while I get ready, and I will go back with her."

"Pardon me, Constance, but it is better that I should go back with Kate. And it is better that her husband should know of her intention, even."

"I don't want to hide it," said Kate.

"Come with me, Katie, then, for a little while, and I will order the pony-carriage for you and papa;" and so saying, Constance led her sister away to her room to remove the traces of her tears ; and the first thing they did was to sit down and cry together. This process softened Kate considerably ; but her sister's tender entreaties had no more effect than her father's authority in convincing her that she ought not to separate herself, even for a term of years, from her husband. On this point she was hard and unrelenting. It seemed doubtful if she would yield, even if her father denied her a home.

In a short time the sisters came down together, both

dressed and ready, for Constance proposed to drive them herself. They swallowed a cup of tea in the drawing-room, and declared themselves ready, at least Constance did, for Kate preserved an almost sullen silence. They were soon driving rapidly along the road to the station.

Mr. Vaughan intended to remonstrate with Harry against his suddenly-formed resolution of leaving the country, and he had hope that his remonstrance would not be without effect. As he was hurried along he thought out the arguments which he would address to his son-in-law, and which he believed might prove effective; but, in case they did not, he employed himself also in strengthening his failing resolution to urge his daughter to go with her husband, and trust to his bringing her back again to settle in England. Alas! there was, he confessed, nothing to trust to, except that the restlessness which drove him away would drive him back again.

They parted with Constance at the station, and after a cheerless journey reached Kate's pretty little mansion in time, if she had wished it, or her father had thought it right, to appear as if nothing unusual had happened. The house was lighted up, the master had returned, and dinner was ready.

Harry brightened up when he saw them, and looked perfectly cordial. Kate, however, disappeared, and Mr. Vaughan set to work at once on his unenviable task. He knew there was only the time to spare in which Kate might be supposed to be dressing. Mr. Vaughan told him plainly what had passed between his daughter and himself; it was, he thought, the strongest argument he could use if Harry retained a particle of tenderness towards his wife. He was quite unprepared to find that, as Kate had said, he was willing to leave her, and did not look upon her going to her father as such a heinous offence after all. He might go







"Harry talked as fast as ever."

and make a home for her, and return to take her out with him; or she might join him in a year or two.

"She shall not leave you with my consent," Mr. Vaughan had said.

And Harry made answer that, of course, he should be very glad if she would come with him and be reasonable.

Mr. Vaughan looked at Harry with the kind of fear with which most men regard lunatics. Here was a being to him incalculable, whose motives he had no means of gauging, and on whom the influences which would have swayed him were altogether lost. As he looked at him, he trembled for his daughter's future.

"Can we offer you no inducement to stay among us?" he began, lightly.

"I think not," he replied, in the same tone; "there's nothing like freedom, and nobody here can do as he likes with himself or anything that is his."

Kate made her appearance, elaborately dressed, as usual. The dinner-bell sounded, she took her father's arm, and the three went in to dinner.

Mr. Vaughan spoke of the events of the day, and Harry talked as fast as ever. Their voices sounded across a table, but they were far apart in spirit; no electric telegraph of sympathy passed from one to another, for Kate had shut her heart towards her father, who was pierced with sorrow at the lonely ring in her voice.

At last the dreaded subject came on. It would not have been Harry if he had kept it long to himself.

"I find that a first-class vessel will sail the first week in April," he said, looking at Mr. Vaughan, whose eyes sought Kate's in fear and trembling.

But Kate sat as expressionless as a statue.

"But you do not think of going so soon as that?" said Mr. Vaughan.

"I don't see that it matters to us whether we go sooner or later."

"It matters a great deal to me, who must part with my child," Mr. Vaughan began.

Harry looked at Kate.

"It does not matter sooner or later," she said, perversely, and rose from the table. "No, it does not matter what becomes of me," she murmured, in the abandonment of youthful anguish, when she was shut in the drawing-room alone.

Over their wine, Mr. Vaughan tried to soften the heart of his obdurate son-in-law, and change his purpose; but in vain. "I never was so near quarrelling utterly with any one in my life," he said to Constance; "he is obstinate as a mule, only that is not his kind of obstinacy. It is like beating a pillow to try and convince him, or change his mind; and it would be nothing if his mind was worth anything; but it is not. If it were not for the dreadful responsibility of spoiling their lives by putting them asunder, I would never let her go."

"It would not spoil her life surely, papa, to come back to us," said Constance, thinking now she might plead her sister's cause.

"I know the world and human nature better than you, Constance," said her father, "and I feel sure it would. A deserted wife is always a woman more or less *suspect*. Only think what that would be to our passionate, loving, generous Kate—a torture in itself. Think of the galling of a tie which cannot be got rid of, and which binds to nothing of love and duty; and as the dreary years went on, and he did not return, there might come—warping her nature continually—deadly temptations for both, which I cannot bear to think of. We must beware of our very love for her leading us to desire to keep her. It is better that she should go."



## CHAPTER XLV.

### THE MEANING OF POVERTY.

**L**IFE seemed to have lost all interest to Kate West. In our suffering we are often cruel, and she chose to consider, in abandoning herself to grief, that she was left to suffer alone; that her father and sister would never have allowed her to go away if they had cared as much for her as she did for them: therefore she shut up her heart from them, and the old happy intercourse between the sisters, which had made every trifle of their daily lives a matter of mutual confidence, seemed to have come to an end.

Harry, in the midst of his preparations for departure, was too much engrossed to notice that his wife behaved more like an automaton than a woman. But just then an event occurred which roused and took her out of herself for a time.

The pair had come down to breakfast. As usual, Kate was first in the room; for Harry was always either too early or too late for everything. She came in with a dreary, listless look on her bright face, glanced at the table on which the morning meal was spread, and saw a letter lie on each plate—one for herself and one for Harry. Without so much as advancing to look at them, she went and stood on the hearth-rug, and gazed into the fire, as one gazes when the day is done. There was no impatience in her waiting,

only once something visibly rose in her throat, and had to be swallowed down. It was the vain self-pity of youth, which it needed her whole strength to still.

Harry came in at last, smiling with his insensate smile, and they sat down together. Kate lifted her letter—only a little note from Constance—and thrust it into her pocket unread. What a short time ago it seemed since every letter was a little treasure to be pounced upon and read, and handed over from one to another at home—shorter still since she would have been leaning over Harry's shoulder, impatient to share the contents of a missive so important looking as that which he was now perusing.

"So it is settled at last," he exclaimed, tossing the letter over to Kate with an expression between pleasure and disgust.

"What is settled?" she asked, carelessly.

"That affair of Aunt West's legacy. Read the letter, and you will see," he replied.

She did as she was bidden, and ran through the broad square sheet, which informed her that the affairs of the bank in which Mrs. West's legacy to Esther had been invested were wound up at last, and that something over six hundred pounds had fallen to Esther's share, the estate dividing half-a-crown in the pound.

"It is very little," said Kate.

"But better than nothing at all," laughed Harry; "and I dare say she will be very glad to get it," he added, with a truer appreciation of the value of money.

They went on with their meal in silence, Kate presiding over her elegantly-appointed table with an air almost of disgust. At length Harry, who had only been too busy to speak, started up, saying, "I have a hundred things to do to-day, Kate. Can you carry the news of this fortune to Esther? I cannot spare the time myself."

Kate consented, in a pleasureless way. It did not occur to her that she might be carrying a message of comfort and gladness and hope and life. Esther, she knew, had given up expecting any help from this quarter, but she did not know that she needed help so much; and, as often happens, the help had not come a day too soon. Esther had not the heart to turn away her little scholars when the fees were not forthcoming—and the fees were not forthcoming frequently enough. A large proportion of the tradespeople in the neighbourhood were afflicted with want of money, and not the tradespeople only, but those who patronised them, and lived in handsome houses in the neighbouring streets and squares. Indeed, it was with these latter that the impecuniosity originated generally. As a consequence, the tradesmen's little girls were the first to suffer, education for little girls in that class being often considered only a genteel superfluity. Then the wave of commercial disaster had reached ever wider and wider circles, and in one of the circles had included and swept down the firm of builders and contractors with whom Martin and Willie had been placed. The works were closed the day after Philip's accident, and the lads had been idle—with an enforced idleness more wearisome than the hardest work—ever since. In vain Esther strove to encourage them. They went about with rueful faces trying to find employment, and finding none. It was pitiable to see them droop so quickly, and lose heart so soon.

"We've known fellows go about for weeks and months," they said, "till they hadn't a shoe to their feet or a bit to put in their mouths. And it comes over and over again. Whenever one saves a little money in the good times, it's all used up in the bad."

The twins were at work again, but they had not found situations which they considered proportioned to their

merits, and they were accordingly in a state of ~~chronic~~ discontent. The gloom which reigned in the little ~~house~~ in Sutton's Alley was sufficiently depressing, and ~~seemed~~ deepening as the days went on.

On that very morning on which Kate was setting out with the letter, there had been a painful scene in the Potter household. Martin and Willie would rise at their ~~usual~~ hour, only to find themselves in everybody's way, it seemed. There appears to be an attitude peculiar to ~~men~~ out of work—the elbows resting on the knees, the ~~head on~~ the hands, and the long stare into the fire, if there ~~be~~ a fire, or even into the empty grate. The two lads ~~fell into~~ this attitude at once, and would sit thus, one on each ~~side~~ of the fire, while Sarah prepared the morning meal. They breakfasted together alone when at work, and they ~~had~~ made their usual custom a pretext for absenting themselves from the family breakfast, and latterly of eating a piece of dry bread by themselves in the kitchen before setting out on their day's search.

When Esther came down on the morning in question, she found poor Sarah sitting crying by the fire, in the midst of her neglected preparations.

"I only said they were a little bit in the way," she sobbed, in explanation; and Esther at length made out that the lads had taken offence at their sister's words, and had gone out without any breakfast at all, while poor Sarah had only been anxious to conceal from them the fact that there was not a sufficiency even of bread for all.

It was the end of the quarter, and for a week or two no money would be forthcoming from the scholars; but before the morning was over, Esther had turned into money every little ornament she possessed, and had gone to her work with that heavy aching at her heart which the pressure of real poverty gives when it has to be shared with a home



"I only said they were a little bit in the way."





circle. Esther felt that she could have better endured it alone. She could hardly fix her attention on the task before her; and when called out of the schoolroom to see Kate, it was with a sickening flutter of the heart that she obeyed the summons.

Kate communicated her good news silently by presenting the letter, but she was not prepared for the reception which it met. Esther turned pale with emotion, and trembled violently.

"If you only knew what a great relief this is," she explained; "but you cannot know, for you have never known poverty."

"You have not wanted for anything, surely?" said Kate. "You would have come to us."

"Poverty means wanting things, Kate," said Esther, smiling through a mist of thankful tears; "but we have not felt the pressure long. It has only been very bad for a week or two. There has been nothing but misfortune ever since the night of your party, Kate. You must never expect me to come to another. It does not do to live a divided life; I have sold all my ornaments to buy simple food."

"Poor Esther! How selfish I have been," cried Kate, clasping her in her arms; "but if you only knew how miserable I am."

"Miserable!" repeated Esther, who thought Kate had been quite contented with the lot she had chosen; "you, miserable?"

And then Kate confided to her the source of her unhappiness, and without directly condemning her husband, allowed Esther to perceive exactly how matters stood between them. She, too, counselled acquiescence, and Kate turned from her impatiently.

"Yes—yes, I must go," she said, "but it is against my

will, and I shall never be happy again." She shuddered, visibly. "Do you know I feel the kind of horror of this voyage which I suppose I would feel if suddenly told I must die!—the kind of pity for myself, and chillness of dread."

Esther tried to comfort her. "It is what we have all been looking forward to. My brothers and sisters are eager to go; I cannot say that I am, but I dare say it will be my fate."

"Could you not come with us?" said Kate, catching at the idea. "I am sure Harry could do something for the boys."

"It is worth thinking of; but you go so early," said Esther.

"Perhaps if you were going, Harry would wait," said Kate, eagerly. She was young, and though she had abandoned herself to an unhappy fate, she could not help brightening up at the thought of the alleviation presented to her. She took her departure, with a promise on Esther's part to think of the proposition, and on hers to come and ascertain the result.

While speaking to Kate, Esther had seen her brother Martin slip into the house, with his handsome face downcast and miserable. As soon as her visitor was gone she sought him, and found him in the kitchen, his head on his hand, as usual. She sought him first, for there had sprung up a firm alliance between them.

"Here's good news, Martin," she said, touching his arm. "My long-delayed fortune has come at last. It is not a very great one, but it will relieve us of all our present difficulties."

It seemed an immense sum to the lad, and he brightened up at once. His first words were, "Does mother know?"

"Nobody knows yet, but we must get her here and tell her;" and Mary was brought out of the schoolroom (whose

occupants were not sorry to be left to their own devices) and told the good news. Unmingled thankfulness was the first feeling in Mary's mind, and in that of every member of the family, as one by one they came to know it. But this was not destined to be of long duration. Martin and Willie began to look as gloomy as ever before the day was out. They had said to one another, "It is her money, and we have no right to touch it;" and when the evening came, they boldly proposed that Esther should lend them enough to go and try their fortunes in the far West. Their old desire to emigrate was upon them stronger than ever.

Mary looked in the face of her eldest daughter as the arbitress of their fate.

"I can bear it if we all go together; not unless," she cried.

Then Esther told them of Mrs. West's proposal, that they should go out in the same ship with her and her husband; and an eager discussion ensued. Martin and Willie urged that time was money, and that every day delayed was lost. Their radiant looks of hope and eagerness appealed to Esther strongly.

"Let us go," she said, deliberately; and in the jubilation which followed, both she and her mother had to hide a sinking of the heart. All the others were delighted with the prospect.





## CHAPTER XLVI.

### MARCH BUDS.

**T**HE March buds were out on the sunny sides of the hedgerows, and the daffodils were blowing in crowds at the foot of the orchard, when Timothy Wiggett brought Philip home to his own house. The house missed its mistress, harsh and queer as she had been, and Timothy also missed her and mourned for her as better women are not always missed and mourned for.

She had only lived eight days after her rash act, and, strange to say, they had been days of patient suffering. The cold had produced inflammation, under which she sank rapidly, and, with Timothy to nurse her, she passed away in peace, like a fretful child that the mother has at length succeeded in soothing to rest.

"A good job too," murmured the village, which had lain its finger upon a certain newspaper paragraph; "a very good riddance she must be to him. He'll have some peace in his life now."

But the philosophy of the village was entirely at fault. It is true, Timothy's troubles were at an end; but it seemed to him that so, too, were his pleasures. He had nobody to love, nobody who cared enough for him to worry and fret over him as Sally had worried and fretted; and so he went about his work, after he had laid her to rest in the

village churchyard, a changed man, his mouth drooping at the corners, and his big chest heaving big unconscious sighs.

Easter fell very early that year—to Constance Vaughan the saddest Easter she had yet known. She had always rejoiced in the season as the happiest time of the year—the time of hope, and promise, and renewed beauty, and fresh activity; and though of late her joy had had in it something of the sober sadness which change must always bring to the tender-hearted, still she was strong in youth and hope, and no great sorrow had led her to shrink from the advancing years. But now every day brought with it the certainty of a real parting—of a breach in the home circle only less than death. She could hardly see the March buds blowing without tears. Every token of the coming spring was a token that the time of Kate's departure was drawing nearer and nearer. And Kate was so changed and alienated, that the parting was likely to be bitter indeed. It was a proof of this alienation that she had not at once informed Constance of the fact that the Potters had settled to go out with Harry and her.

On the slightest hint of such a possibility, Harry had bestirred himself to promote the plan. Next to being in motion himself, nothing delighted him so much as setting others in motion. He saw the Potters daily until everything was settled. He urged those who needed urging, and talked, and promised, and smoothed away difficulties. He was delighted with Martin and Willie, and would be glad to be of use to them. In short, he made it appear an opportunity too precious to be lost. He helped them to secure their passage, and then to choose their outfit, and was none the less friendly with the brothers because they announced their determination to spend as little as possible. They and the younger boys would rough it in the steerage,

while their mother, the girls, and the two little ones would go second class. It was all fixed before Constance heard a word about it; and when she did, it was from Esther herself, who had been trusting to Kate to communicate the first intelligence, and was wondering at the silence of her friend.

From Constance Esther did not conceal that the prospect before her was not a happy one. "The nearer it comes," she wrote, "the harder it seems. My heart would fail me if it were not that my mother leans upon me. It is my duty to go, and there is nothing to keep me here. Except yourself there is no one to care for my going, and yet I feel as if bound by the strongest ties. I can hardly bear the thought that the parting is most likely for ever."

Mr. Vaughan was greatly pleased with the unexpected intelligence. Next to his own daughters he liked and admired Esther, and it seemed to him a delightful arrangement—the most fortunate thing for Kate that could possibly have happened. Constance could not but acknowledge that it was, and yet she could not but be sorry to lose her friend as well as her sister. Her feelings began to be in a state of conflict such as she had never known, and she had time to attend to them now; for though her father's chief, indeed only companion, she was often left to her own meditations, while he pursued his favourite studies.

When she sat down to answer Esther's letter, she was thus alone; her father had retired to his study. She occupied one of the windows of the once busy drawing-room, sitting pen in hand, and looking out into the budding garden. She had read Esther's words again, and her mind was soon engaged in reflection upon them. No one to care for her going! What was Mr. Carrington about? He evidently had not followed up the re-introduction gained at Kate's party. Had he changed his mind, or was he labour-

ing under his usual indecision—an indecision which would cost him the loss of his object? She found herself speculating on how he would bear the loss. She thought of Esther gone. Would he turn to her friendship for comfort, and—might not his friendship ripen into love? Whither had her thoughts led her? She covered her face with her hands for inward shame. She hated herself for the thought, which seemed to her a double treason, a treason to both her friends. “No; he shall not let her go. I promised to help him, and I will,” she resolved. “I will break one promise in order to keep the other. I will tell Esther that he loves her.”

She took up her pen to write, impulsive as ever; but in trying to find the fit of words for such a disclosure, her judgment took the place of impulse, and she saw that she might do harm instead of good by such a course. Esther's delicacy would be up in arms. She would be sure to place fresh difficulties in his way, instead of removing any.

Constance had meant that they should meet at Easter, and had written to Mrs. Carrington, inviting her and Mr. Carrington to spend a few days with them then. She had judged it best to mention at the same time that Esther would be with them. Mr. Carrington would see the note, and urge his mother to accept the invitation. Instead of an acceptance, however, a refusal had come. They were going down to Devonshire, and there had been an end of that.

A desperate measure at length suggested itself to Constance. She would write to Mr. Carrington at his chambers. She had never written to him before, and if she wrote now to his mother's house, she must know, and would either inquire into or misconstrue the circumstance. Mrs. Carrington's intentions with regard to herself, and her motives with regard to Esther, dawned upon her as she



meditated, and still further impelled her to act. It was strange that she never for a moment doubted Esther's power to return Carrington's affection. There had been just that amount of confidence between them on the subject which might mislead both. They had both liked and admired him, and both been interested in his character; but his companionship had rather seemed to stimulate their minds than to touch their hearts. Constance judged her friend by herself. The object of the keen and subtle tenderness, the mere reflection of which had penetrated her heart, could not be insensible. The consciousness of love might be shut up and hidden, as the rose in the bud is hidden in its calyx of green, but she did not doubt that it would blossom in the sunshine of his favour.

She took up her pen and wrote, not without agitation, the first lines she had ever written in secret. They bore witness, in their abruptness, to the state of her mind.

DEAR MR. CARRINGTON,—I promised to help you, and, to redeem my promise, I write to you now. If you wish to see Esther again, you will not go down to Devonshire, you will come here. She will be with us from Thursday till Tuesday. She is going out to Australia with Kate and Harry—she and the whole family. They sail the week after Easter. It was to have been put off for another month, but Harry has arranged it all!

Yours very sincerely,

CONSTANCE VAUGHAN.

"Harry has arranged it all" was dashed underneath with a feeling that he had been the beginning of discord and trouble, and that she would have been glad to blot him out of their lives there and then.

The succeeding days were at once too long and too short for Constance Vaughan—days of feverish impatience and anxiety combined. She was not one who would droop under an unrequited love. There is no necessity to quote

concerning her the much-used "worm in the bud." She could feel, and feel deeply ; but to her active mind and large liberal culture there were other things in the world worth living for, if equal love should be denied. She could turn from it to the duties of the day—turn resolutely from herself and engage her heart for the welfare of others. In the interval that had passed she had disciplined herself to this ; but she now felt that it would be better for her if all possibility of hope were at an end. In an unguarded moment she had known that it could live.

She now busied herself in preparation for her guests. It had seemed, indeed, at one time, as if Kate would have withdrawn. She had written to say that some friends whom Harry had picked up in the North had invited them, and that Harry desired to go, for half the week at least. She supposed she had better go with him. But Constance had opposed with such earnest and tender entreaty, that Kate had softened in her mood, and Harry had been prevailed upon to go alone, much to his sister-in-law's secret satisfaction. For a few days, at least, she would have Kate all to herself again.





## CHAPTER XLVII.

### NO ANSWER.

**I**T was Thursday before Easter at last, and Kate was at Redhurst at an early hour. It was her first visit since the day when her father had refused to listen to her prayer to be taken back to her old home, and it did not appear likely to be a comfortable one to either him or her. Whether it was that the memory of the refusal stirred her to renewed soreness, or that her grief at the thought of leaving England was intensified at sight of the scene of her happy girlhood, her looks and speech alike spoke of ill-concealed and bitterly resented suffering. She took up the position of a not very welcome stranger instead of a daughter of the house, and managed to stand aloof both from love and pity.

Her father took pains, by every tender courtesy, to win her back. He would have given anything to have her open her heart to him, to win her to acknowledge that he was in the right, as he knew her better judgment was already telling her, but his efforts were unavailing. Once or twice, when he tried to introduce the subject, she set it coldly aside. If he could have seen the passionate grief in which she indulged in secret he would have been more troubled still.

She went about the place alone, followed by the old blind house-dog, whom she had often hugged in the passionate griefs of her childhood, once sobbing herself to

sleep with her head pillowed on his side. But this was a grief which no sleep would soothe. She had awakened to life-long disappointment, and she knew not how to bear it. To have her wishes disregarded, her influence unfelt, her life emptied at once of freedom, and love, and joy—this was what she had to bear. Besides the simple natural sorrow of parting from all whom she had loved, she had the terrible consciousness that she did not, and could not love as she ought, the man whose will had become her law.

The afternoon brought Mr. Walton and Milly—every afternoon of the holidays was to see them there. They were only partly aware of Kate's trouble, and were too happy themselves to be able fully to sympathise with it. Milly was very sorry for her sister's departure; but if her husband wished it, Kate would be sure to get reconciled to it in time, and doubtless all would go well; she and her husband would come back again. For her own part, Milly would have preferred staying at home, but she would have gone round the world with Herbert, and though Harry was not like Herbert, Kate must like going with him.

This was the strain in which she spoke comfort, with the effect of making one of her hearers irritable, and the others apprehensive.

The little family circle no longer thought, no longer felt alike; the chain of sympathy was broken. They were almost uncomfortable till Esther arrived, and introduced, naturally and from another point of view, the one subject which occupied the thoughts of all.

The evening passed in discussing the voyage, its discomforts, and the alleviations of which these were capable; the country to which they were bound, and its social and political prospects, of which Mr. Walton took the gloomy, and Mr. Vaughan the hopeful view. It was most unlike the evenings which the same group had often passed there.

There was no gaiety where all had once been gay. They were grave and subdued, like people who met for the last time. An undefined feeling of this kind crept over them, and deepened as the evening advanced. When music was asked for, Constance and Esther, who sang well together, seemed to choose the saddest songs, till they seemed to breathe the very air of sighs. Tears were unshed, but they were not far from gathering, when Kate took her sister's place and dashed into a light and bright, but noisy Italian song, which jarred on everybody. Esther felt glad when the evening came to an end.

The services of Good Friday had a salutary influence on this unsatisfactory state of things. It united them once more in feelings at once tender and sacred. Their own trials became insignificant in the contemplation of the sufferings of the highest and holiest.

"How dear she can be," said Constance to Esther, when the day was done, and Kate, though silent, had been warmly affectionate to her, and almost penitent towards her father. "Oh, Esther, what is to become of her?"

It was very late indeed, or rather very early, when Constance retired from Esther's room through a small dressing-room which opened on her own. She almost wondered at herself that, during that long conference on things temporal and spiritual, she had not been betrayed into some confidence which must have led to the disclosure of her secret, or, rather Mr. Carrington's; but he was not mentioned. And Esther, too, retired wondering at the reticence of her friend, and almost inclined to think that there was nothing in the hint which Mrs. Carrington had so cleverly conveyed.

On Saturday—how desperately fast the days went by!—Esther, accompanied by both Kate and Constance, went down to Mr. Wiggett's garden to visit little Mary, whom

Esther had conveyed thither on her way to Redhurst. The garden wore its soberest and tenderest hues of brown and green. Patches of rich, smooth, freshly-turned mould alternated with patches of springing plants. The borders were not gay, but the spring flowers showed here and there in white and gold, and in the orchard the plums had put on their light snowy blossoms. Outside, in the fields, which made part of the garden, men were sowing breadths of carrots, parsnips, savoys, kale, and all their kindred. Inside, in the flower garden, Mr. Wiggett himself was sowing sweet peas, mignonette, stocks, and other hardy annuals, planting, and grafting, and training his wall fruit. In the former of these occupations he was being actively assisted by little Mary. He had written her name in big letters all along one of the borders, and she had strewed out of her own hands the seed into the furrows, which were to blossom into "Mary Potter," in white and purple candy-tuft.

They had just finished the task when Esther and her friends appeared. Mary was a little disappointed that there was nothing to be seen at present for her labour. The seed was covered up, and she could only point to the bare blank earth, and assure them that the wonder was hidden there.

Little Mary's beauty and grace captivated every one. The child's gaiety was always tender; great pleasures—and her visits to the garden had been great to her beyond comparison with all the pleasures of her life—exalted rather than excited her. Kate began to court her acquaintance, and Mary, after a little consideration, inclined to be friends, especially as she had seen "the lady" before. "The lady" was her distinctive name for her sister's grandest and gayest visitor.

While Kate chatted with the child, Constance was in full

conference with Mr. Wiggett concerning her greenhouse plants. He invited her to come and inspect his, and as they went off together, Mary, not choosing to lose sight of one friend in gaining another, led Kate to follow in the same direction; Esther brought up the rear.

The greenhouse was far gayer than the garden, and as the whole party passed through its narrow door in single file, Esther was left outside. Looking up through the glass of a similar structure she caught sight of a pale face and gleaming grey eyes. It was Philip, and he was looking full at her. Her ready smile was answered, flashed back on her with all the light of his singularly radiant one. But Esther did not stop there. She had come to see him as well as her little sister, and when she saw him she naturally went straight to him, turned from the door she was entering, and went in where he was sitting in the warm, moist forcing-house.

"Are you better?" she asked, her voice full of the tender reverence with which she had learned to regard him.

"Yes," he answered in his abrupt way, adding, hurriedly, "I have been too long idle. I am going back to work on Tuesday."

"You know that we are going away?" she returned, not knowing what to say, for his manner checked her speech.

Another and yet more abrupt "Yes." One unused to him might have construed it into, "What does that matter to me?" but Esther, looking in his face, saw there an expression of acute pain. He was silent for a moment or two. He could not grow paler, but a livid hue spread round his eyes. He had risen from his seat to meet her, and now he was obliged to sink into it again.

"You are ill," cried Esther, turning faint, as she saw him apply his handkerchief to his lips, and felt rather than

saw that the red tide of life had burst its barriers again  
‘I fear you are very ill.’

He looked up almost gaily, a sort of chivalrous defiance in his manner, and deprecating her concern, whispered, “I shall be better presently.”

She stood waiting, unwilling to leave him thus.

“Let me call Mr. Wiggett,” she said, at length.

He shook his head; and looking round, she could see the others moving away. Kate nodded as she passed with little Mary. They were gone to explore some other corner of the garden.

When Philip recovered himself she was standing over him. She had pushed one of the casements open to give him air, and her eyes were full of tears, so that she could not meet his.

“I must go now,” she said, and half held out her hand, and then withdrew it, as there was no corresponding movement on his part.

“I shall not see you again,” he said, hurriedly. “I have got a job down in the country, and when I come back to the old place you will be gone.”

There was a tone so sad in his voice, that it brought before Esther vividly the almost desolate loneliness of his lot.

“I shall have to work all the harder,” he said, half to himself.

She looked questioningly at him.

“I shall have to work hard to forget you,” came from his lips, while the light of an almost overpowering passion flashed into his face, “or rather to forget myself,” he added, with a gasp, and rising to his feet again.

Esther stood for a moment wavering; the next, she laid her hand upon his arm, and, scarcely knowing what she said, faltered, “Come with us.”



His heart gave a great bound, and he seemed to gain a sudden strength. He took her hand and carried it to his lips, and then held it in both of his.

He comprehended in a moment all that her words implied of happiness in the future. He saw before him a land of promise, a land where men of nerve and brain like his have room to grow great. He knew that in that future she offered him herself.

"God bless you, for ever and ever!" he cried, looking into her charmed eyes. "But it must not be. I shall not die yet—I shall do some more work before I go; but I carry the warrant here within me, signed in that broken vein of mine. You have given me joy enough to last me till the end."

Little Mary came back breathless with running, to find her sister and Philip standing hand in hand, and looking "glad and sorry," as she phrased it, "all at once." A long, silent clasp of the hands, a long, half-tender, half-mournful gaze, never to be forgotten by either, and they parted. Esther found herself walking down the garden path by little Mary's side, with a strange, hitherto unknown feeling, as if she no longer belonged to herself. Not even to Constance did she breathe a word of what had passed; and Constance, full of her own anxious thoughts, did not notice her absence of mind.

Constance, who was always on the look out for the post, had her mind set at rest at last. In the evening a letter came to her from Mr. Carrington. It ran:—

DEAR CONSTANCE,—You will be glad to hear that I have had it out with my mother, and that my own mind is quite made up. I come up to town on Tuesday, and will lose no time in learning my future fate.—  
Ever yours sincerely,  
B. CARRINGTON.

"Just like him. An answer and no answer," thought Constance, as she put the note into her pocket, and tried to look unconcerned.



## CHAPTER XLVIII.

### TO GRAVESEND.

**T**HE brief Easter holidays were over and gone. Constance accompanied her sister to town in order to be with her all the time that remained till her departure. Mr. Vaughan was to join them a few days later, and to go with them to Plymouth, where they were to embark. Kate's improvement had been transient enough; now and then she relented, but for the most part she took refuge from her grief in a stony quietness, which her father and sister knew to be unreal, and which gave them the keenest pain.

The Potters were to embark at Gravesend, but Constance would not say farewell to her friend till the very last. She would see her again when the ship touched at Plymouth. Nothing whatever had been heard of Mr. Carrington. Constance had called at his mother's house, though she was ready to quarrel with herself for having done so; but they had not returned to town. It was a mystery, or rather it was no mystery to Constance, for she solved it immediately. The hero of the piece had turned faint-hearted after all. He was afraid of the risk of matrimony. She had heard him talk of it as a risk under the most favourable circumstances, so she only judged him out of his own mouth. His conduct, however, went far towards curing her of her too great regard for him; and that he

was not worthy of Esther was the conclusion at which she speedily arrived.

At length the day of departure came. On the morrow the ship was to leave Gravesend, and the passengers must be on board the day before. Everything was ready in the Potter household. The whole family had assembled once more in the dismantled house in the midst of their numerous packages, having slept and breakfasted in one of the least disreputable coffee-houses in the neighbourhood. The bulk of their belongings had been shipped at the dock, but Martin and Willie were to be the pioneers of the party, and to take care of what remained, and see it safe on board, and for this purpose they were to set off by an earlier train. They could hardly conceal their impatience to be on the move, while Bob and Walter, though uneasy at the sight of their mother's sad face and frequent sighs, and Esther's grave, pale looks, found it difficult to keep down their spirits.

At last the cart—belonging to the neighbouring green-grocer—which was to convey the baggage, arrived, not before Bob had been twice sent off to expedite its coming, and Martin and Willie assumed the command of loading it—a command which the two younger brothers for once obeyed with alacrity. When it was ready, nothing would serve Master Johnny but going with his brothers; so, after a brief opposition from his mother, he was suffered to ride away in triumph on the top of a pile of boxes, while the others walked by the side of the cart. Mary could not bear the division of the party, and her opposition had been conquered by the promise that they would all wait at the station and go by the same train. It was a sight to watch the boys go off, beckoning back so cheerfully, leaving behind not a single regret, full of hope, and life, and energy. But to their happy smiles their mother's eyes were blind, blind with smarting tears.

She was still further troubled when the twins, instead of waiting to go with her, set off to walk by themselves. It seemed as if she could not keep her flock together any longer, an omen of the lasting separation which must sooner or later come.

Timothy Wiggett had insisted on seeing them off. He had slept in town for the purpose, and was at Sutton's Alley in good time with a cab. Into this Mary and Esther and Sarah and little Polly were to be put, with sundry small packages not entrusted to the cart: he himself was to ride on the box.

At the last moment Esther missed her mother, and went through the house to find her. A stifled sob came from one of the empty rooms. It was the room in which her father died. She paused at the door for a little, and then entered softly and stood by Mary's side. She was crouching on the floor with her face hidden in her hands. Very softly Esther whispered, "Mother." The name from her had, even yet, a newness and sweetness to Mary's ear. "Mother, we are all waiting for you," repeated Esther; and Mary felt the comfort of the wisely chosen words, and rose and suffered Esther to lead her downstairs and place her in the cab.

At the station, Mr. Wiggett, under Esther's direction, managed to get the whole family together in one second-class compartment. Mary's anxiety that they should all be together seemed to increase, and the carelessness of the twins in the matter of gratifying her wish was painful to witness. Martin and Willie absented themselves for a time, in their eagerness to see that everything was right, and Bob and Walter in their eagerness to see everything, right or wrong. But at last Timothy, by dint of warding off all intruders, and nearly wedging himself into the carriage window, got them all together, and shut them in, just as the train moved off.

On the way to Gravesend little Mary sat on Timothy Wiggett's knee, and fell asleep there. Timothy had not much to say. That there was nothing worth saying in a world where such things as this went on was pretty much his view of matters mundane in the present crisis. He looked down at the child from time to time, and touched her cheek with his fat hand wistfully. It was unlike his bright little Polly to be sleeping thus. She was breathing hard, too, and had got a bright red rose on either delicate cheek.

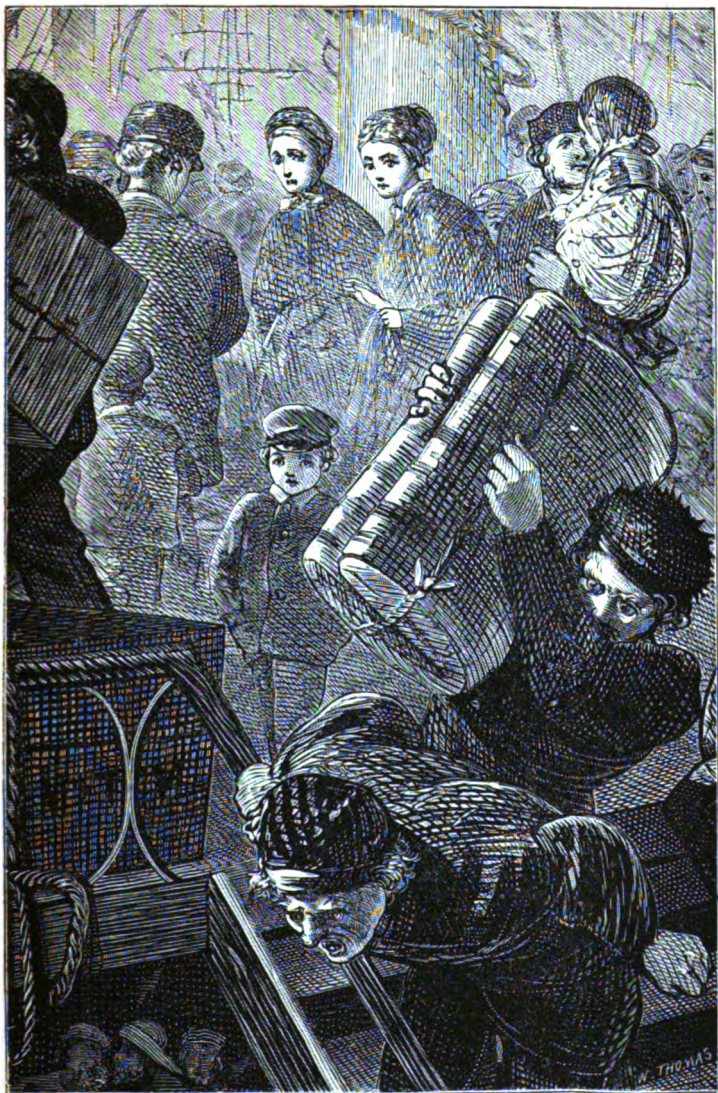
"She is wearied out with all the bustle and excitement of these last few days," said Mary, noticing the look. "My own head aches with it; and she woke and cried with hers a good deal in the night."

"She's too tender for this sort of thing," he replied, shaking his head. "It's a bad business altogether, and if you like to turn back yet, you'll all have a roof to shelter ye as long as my name's Timothy."

A faint smile at what seemed only a mild joke was all the answer Mary gave.

They were soon at their present destination. Mary continually looking round for the straying members of her family with the distracted air of a lost person, was put into the boat last, and was the last, save Timothy, to leave it. They were all on the deck before her.

But what a deck! None of the party, except Martin and Willie, had ever before seen an emigrant ship, and the confusion caused them to feel something like dismay. They had to move on, to give room to fresh comers, through narrow lanes, between piles of goods. Bales, barrels, boxes were being swung in the air from the boats and lighters alongside, and dropped into the depths, and rolled, and bumped, and knocked about on every side. The vessel was an auxiliary screw, and they were coaling her, and



"The confusion caused them to feel something like dismay."



black dust flew about, and water floated on the slippery planks.

Martin and Willie guided the party, for they had had the advantage of a previous visit to the ship, under the care of Harry West. They led the way first to their own quarters. The condition of things there was not such as to reassure them. Down the steep break-neck ladder they could catch a glimpse of the confusion reigning in the semi-darkness below. At the very mouth of this pit two men were squabbling angrily.

"I say, bundle your traps out o' this. That's my berth. I been and took it a week ago."

"No, I won't. First come first served, that's my motto," shouted the defendant, who was evidently of opinion that possession is nine-tenths of the law.

"You won't, won't you! Then I'll make you," retorted the claimant, and was proceeding to a summary ejection, when the appearance of some constituted authority, to which both appealed at once, rendered anything further unintelligible.

"You needn't go down just now," said Martin, catching the look of consternation on his mother's face; "but we have got very good places, not far from the entrance, where we will have plenty of light and air; further back it is rather dark and close."

"What a dreadful place!" groaned Mary.

"Will you have to live down there among those rough men?" asked Esther, her face reflecting the dread on her mother's.

"Men must take the world as they find it, mother," said Martin, with an assumption of manliness which, however, became him well; "they won't do much good in it if they don't," he added, turning to Esther.

"But the boys," she whispered, for even a glance had



told her that the men down there were not the associates that a sister would choose for her brothers, or a mother for her sons. There was worse than rudeness in one or two of the faces she had caught a glimpse of.

"Will and I will take care of them the best we can," he whispered in reply, as they moved away. "We've had plenty of the same sort of thing, and if they take to it, it won't be for want of seeing the ugly side of it. But it isn't in them. They only get to hate it the more the closer they come to it."

Esther drew but small comfort from this philosophy of her brother's, and could not help wishing that the boys had not been separated from them, but she said no more.

They went on, looking down into another similar pit, where a number of women seemed to be preparing for an early dinner, amid much talking and laughing, and screaming and scolding.

Esther was truly thankful when they reached their cabin—narrow and confined as it was—to find it comparatively clean and quiet, and capable of affording some degree of privacy.

"There seems ten times as much coming in as the ship can possibly hold," said Martin to a good-natured sailor.

"There's plenty more to come yet," he answered, laughing. "Never fear, we'll stow it safe enough."

"And how long will this confusion last?"

"Till we're well out to sea."

"I wish we were," he said thoughtfully.

"So do I," echoed the sailor.

Little Mary was crying with her head again, and complaining of the harsh noises; and not all the glorious things to be found in an immense packet of sweets with which Timothy had provided himself could tempt her to raise it from her mother's shoulder and share in the refreshment, to

which her brothers were soon doing ample justice, standing round the cabin door, while the others sat within.

There were other two who turned away from the comfortless meal. Esther and her mother felt as if the first morsel would choke them. They, too, wished the ship would sail. The agony of parting must last as long as they were linked to the shore. They longed to have it over, or even for the night to come and hide them from the noise and tumult, and suffer them to weep in secret.





## CHAPTER XLIX.

### THE GUIDE-BOOK.

“**T**HIS is the very day the Wests were to have sailed,” said Benjamin Carrington to his mother, as the train in which they were seated stopped for a few minutes at one of the stations on the up line to London. They were the only occupants of the carriage, but for all that they had been very sparing in conversation during the long hours of their journey that had already passed. Mrs. Carrington found that speaking while the train was in motion fatigued her, and her son was not sorry to keep silence and give himself up to his own meditations.

“So it is, my dear,” she answered; “I am sorry we did not see them again before they went away. I like her; she was always a favourite of mine; and I think it is quite shocking that she should be dragged out to that dreadful place. I could see she was going against her will, though she was too proud to own it.”

“What an intolerable fellow that young West is,” said her son. And then the train rushed on again, and the old lady sank back among the cushions, while the young man relapsed into his dreamy mood.

After a time, however, he became restless; either the chain of his present thoughts had been broken, or he had wearied of pursuing it. He had given full ten minutes to

the morning paper, and considered himself the master of its contents, the latest intelligence being all he ever troubled himself to read. So he began rummaging a small black despatch-bag which was his constant travelling companion, less with any idea of finding anything readable than of arranging its miscellaneous contents, with that almost excessive love of order which is a characteristic of such minds as his.

His clerk had packed it up on the eve of his departure, and had met him with it at the station, telling him that it contained the letters and papers which as yet he had not seen. The letters he had read on his journey down, the papers he had afterwards disposed of, chiefly in the small hours, when his restless intellect kept him awake. He took them out now one by one, looked at the writing endorsed on each, and bound them together with a stray bit of the orthodox red tape. The letters he put together in a small side-pocket. The bag was exhausted.

Not quite, however. Flat in the bottom of it lay a guide to the beauties of Devon. He had never read it; had been too much occupied to think about it. He took it now, and opened it about the middle, or, rather, it opened of itself there, and disclosed another letter, a letter unlike the rest, one of those long, narrow, pinky envelopes which ladies employ. At first he thought it must be a note of his mother's slipped in by accident, the more so as a glance at the handwriting showed him that it was from Constance, with whose notes to his mother he was perfectly familiar. But no, the letter was unopened, and addressed to himself. There could be no mistake. "Benjamin Carrington, Esq.," and the postmark showed it to be nearly three weeks old. The unfortunate guide-book had been thrust into the black bag back downwards, the letter had slipped into the book, and the book had slipped into the bottom of the bag when

the papers had been pulled out. All this flashed through his mind in a moment, even before he had time to open the note, though he did this impatiently enough.

It was the note which Constance Vaughan had written to him on the eve of the holidays, and which he had never seen. He read it at a glance. When he had done so he neither raved nor tore his hair, nor tossed the offending guide-book out of the carriage window. He folded up the note quite deliberately, and sat looking out at the flying landscape. Miles and miles the express sped on, and he neither moved nor spoke; his thoughts all the while, not unlike that outer world, seemed flying too, while in reality they stood still. He was conscious of this as he looked from time to time on his mother's face, who was now sleeping peacefully opposite to him. "I am not horribly miserable," he thought, and his most mocking smile played round his lips, "but this feeling is worse than the acutest misery. I wish I could shake it off and be in a passion—a good old-fashioned rage at everything and everybody, myself included."

Of course he could say nothing about the note to his mother. Again and again he stole a look at her, not without tenderness. Was it possible that she was aware of this, and had purposely detained him in Devonshire? No, he cast aside the unworthy suggestion. Worldly he knew her to be, but base he could not think her. The very thought roused him to do battle with himself, and recalled the resolution and self-reliance which had lately stirred him. He was determined to carry out the life which he had planned, though she was lost to him for ever. He would not sink into a scoffing sickly-minded Sybarite without an effort. It was his last fight with the sulky demon Do-nothing, and before the train stopped he had prevailed.

When Mrs. Carrington had discovered the immediate

necessity for a visit to some distant relations in Devonshire, her motive had not been far to seek, and was quite apparent to her son. He had resented it far more than he would have resented any active opposition. It was, in fact, treating him like a child, and he took an early opportunity of telling his mother what were his intentions with regard to Esther.

Mrs. Carrington happily took up the ground of objection to Esther's relatives, where she was easily met by her son. Where the spheres of life were so distinct there could be no difficulty, none which such a woman as Esther could not deal with gracefully and graciously. A weaker woman, by her very fears and scruples, might make a mess of it; but she, he felt sure, would be able to act with judgment as well as tenderness. Then he did not intend to go in for a life of pleasure, which meant living for other people's pleasure rather than your own. He meant to enter upon an active life, whether in public or private. He did not, in planning all this for himself, expect her, his mother, to provide the means. He meant to begin life as a poor man, with a small establishment.

This latter portion of his plan was, perhaps, the most distasteful of all to Mrs. Carrington, who loved power, and had on more than one occasion made her son—fond of him and proud of him as she was—feel that she duly appreciated her position as mistress of the purse. He had often felt, in his more active mood, that he lacked freedom, the freedom which only independence can give, and he had lately acknowledged to himself a deficiency of the manly virtues which dependence breeds. Obstinate on the score of trifles he had always been. Now he set himself firmly to make the great stand of his life.

It was not done without a struggle; but at last Mrs. Carrington found herself obliged to yield, and it was then

that her son had written his misleading note to Constance. But having given in on the chief point, she expected to be yielded to on the minor one of still further delay, and in the midst of this new struggle she was seconded by a sharp attack of illness, which confined her for a week to her bed, and for another to the sofa.

Her son had occupied much of his time during her illness—which was only alarming for the first few days—in arranging his affairs, and also in discovering how very much he was in love; and all this in the intervals of the demands made upon him by a large party of very young ladies, to whom he proved an interesting object of study, and who were convinced that he needed a great deal of their society.

He would not have acknowledged a hope so utterly groundless; but as the train neared London, and he felt his resolution return, he began to fancy that Esther might still be his—not even yet be gone. Ships did not always set sail on the appointed days. But if even the worst had happened that seemed probable, the other side of the world was not too far to follow her.

It was with something like impatience that he leaped from the train and assisted his mother from the carriage. Her own man was waiting on the platform to perform all other needful services; but it was with a gasp of astonishment that she heard Mr. Carrington say, "Here is the carriage; I will see you to it, and then I must be absent for an hour or two."

"Where are you going?" said Mrs. Carrington, in astonishment.

"I am going to make an inquiry which cannot be delayed," he answered.

"I never heard of it before," she murmured.

"Do not wait dinner for me," was his only reply, and he was gone.

“So unlike Benjamin,” thought his mother. “He never used to do anything in a hurry. But he is altogether unlike himself,” she added, mentally, with a sigh, as she sank back in her carriage and was driven away alone.







## CHAPTER L.

### TOO LATE.

**T**HE same night saw Benjamin Carrington speeding back to Plymouth. He had learnt that the ship had left Gravesend a day later than had been announced, and that, therefore, in all probability, she would likewise be a day later in making her final start from the southern port. He had also made sure that both the Wests and the Potters were gone.

He had been somewhat afraid to tell his mother how matters stood. He had shrunk from seeing her exhibit some triumph on the occasion—that species of triumph which profound egotists exhibit when events occur to favour their wishes—a triumph as if the course of the universe had been ordered for their especial service. He shrank from seeing this, and yet before dinner was over he had communicated to her the fact of Esther's departure with her family.

“All gone!” the old lady ejaculated, taking the intelligence quite differently from what he had expected. “How do you know?”

“I heard of it by letter to-day, and I have been to both the houses. It is four days since the Potters sailed, and the Wests went down to Plymouth only this morning.”

“What a pity we did not know that those Potters were going,” she remarked.

Esther, cut off from her objectionable relations, and

managed by her, Mrs. Carrington, was quite a different person from Esther with a low-born mother and ill-bred sisters at her back. She did not doubt her power of managing her. She no more doubted her power of managing any human being than she doubted her power to speak. Esther was poor, and she rather liked the idea of her son marrying a poor wife. Then she was by far the most distinguished-looking young lady of her acquaintance; and above all things Mrs. Carrington worshipped distinction.

Mr. Carrington looked up at his mother with a questioning glance as she repeated her last words.

She smiled at him graciously. "We might have managed to detain one of them," she added.

The old lady had made one of the conquests in which she delighted. Her son looked at her gratefully, and thanked her warmly.

She was, however, hardly prepared for a movement so decisive as starting off by the mail train in the hope of catching them up. This was what her son proposed, and, moreover, intended to execute, notwithstanding all that she could urge to the contrary. He would survive the fatigue, and sleep very well in the train, he had no doubt.

He had, however, miscalculated his powers for once. Over-strained and sleepless, he sped through the night; and the hopeless nature of his errand forced itself upon him more and more. He might be in time to see Esther once more, and to tell her how and why he had come; but was it likely that she would forsake her friends and go back with him at a moment's notice? It is true that Constance and Mr. Vaughan would be there to receive her; but he could hardly flatter himself that she loved him well enough to take a step so sudden. What a fool he had been in the past, and on what a wild-goose chase had he come for the present!

In spite of these depressing thoughts, however, he had determined to press his suit in the plainest terms, and snatch Esther, if possible, from the very brink of fate. Faith, too, had risen with courage, and he never doubted for a moment that she would remain wholly uninfluenced by any motive save the one which he desiderated—attachment to himself. That he should find her unable to return his love, was the only possibility he had to dread.

When the pearly light of the May morning glimmered in upon him and the solitary fellow-traveller who had been snoring comfortably by his side for the last three hours at least, Benjamin Carrington looked the anxious lover to perfection. He was haggard with sleeplessness and fatigue, and instead of his usual calm elegance of person and demeanour, he had all the appearance of roused and restless energy. He was no longer looking down on the conflict, but taking part in it—taking his share of hurry, and strife, and wound. Could he have looked at himself just then, bodily or mentally, in that mirror of self-reflection which he so constantly held up to himself, and which had often marred his singleness of purpose, and was fast destroying his simplicity of character, he would have been too much astonished even for self-mockery. But for once in his life Benjamin Carrington had no thought of himself. Well for him if he can pitch his future life at this far nobler key.

The sun was shining full and fair on land and sea when he got out at the station, and stepped into the nearest hotel. He had not far to seek for the intelligence he wanted—it met him on the threshold: the *City* had sailed the evening before. “She kept her time,” said his informant; “the wind was in her favour, and she went off an hour before sundown. I saw her off myself. You weren’t going in her, sir?” he added, noticing the expression of disappoint-

ment on his listener's face, which certainly did not keep its usual impassive look of well-bred indifference.

"No," he replied; "I only came to see a friend on board."

"Too late, sir," and the man shook his head in a rather exasperating manner, while he received his order for a cup of coffee, and led the way to a room.

"There's always a party too late for everything. There was a party just missed being too late for the *City*—caught her swinging by her last rope off the point of the pier. Such a to-do to get them off! They didn't go from this house, for they came straight from the station; but they were to have stayed here, and I gave them a hand, and got them off all right."

"Do you know their names?" said Mr. Carrington. It was just possible that it might be the Wests, and he wanted to find out Constance and her father, who, in all likelihood, were still in the place.

"I don't know their names," the man answered, "for their luggage was in before. They would have been done for if it hadn't; as it was, they had a race for it, and the poor lady hadn't a minute to say good-bye to her pa and another young lady—her sister, I s'pose; and the young gentleman, he cried, 'Come along, Kate,' and she looked wild at him, though she didn't say nothing. It was all his fault they were so late, I s'pose," and the man smiled as if he had witnessed an aside of the comedy of domestic life—a little tiff between a happy young couple, instead of having caught a glimpse of its deepest tragedy.

"Do you know where the elderly gentleman, whom you thought was the lady's father, is stopping?" asked Mr. Carrington. "I think they belong to the party I came to see."

Yes, he was stopping in the house—he and the young

lady; but he didn't know if they were up yet. He would go and see, if the gentleman pleased. And in the meantime coffee was served.

No; it was too early to trouble the lady and gentleman, even if they were his friends, decided the new arrival; but he gave the man his card, and told him to ascertain if the gentleman's name was Vaughan, and to present the card to him at breakfast.

The man politely returned from the bar to say that the name of the lady and gentleman he had indicated was Vaughan, and that he would attend to the instructions he had received.

Then, after slight but much-needed refreshment, Mr. Carrington set out again. It was still too early to seek the Vaughans, but he had got into that state in which repose is impossible—in which the tension of brain and nerve must be gradually relaxed before rest can be achieved. He thought the sea air would cool the fever of his head, the outlook on the water soothe his spirit. He went down to the harbour, and paced about the shore, curiously seeking from some loitering sailors corroborative evidence concerning the sailing of the vessel.

He had thus wandered aimlessly for an hour or so, and was thinking of returning to the hotel, when he saw before him, at a little distance, Constance and her father. They did not see him. They were looking out to sea, pointing, in all probability, to the spot where the last glimpse of the departing ship had been caught by their watching eyes.

He went up to them slowly. They were evidently in the deepest grief, though outwardly calm. Constance was clinging to her father piteously. She was the first to observe Mr. Carrington's approach. She did not even look surprised, far less pleased.



"They were looking out to sea."



"You here, Mr. Carrington," she said, coldly, as he held out his hand.

"And too late," he answered, speaking the words which were sounding in his brain like the murmur of the sea.

He had turned to receive Mr. Vaughan's greeting. "You are still in Devon?" said the latter—Mr. Vaughan's idea being, evidently, that he had come from somewhere in the neighbourhood.

"I came down from London last night," replied Mr. Carrington. "I thought the ship was not to have sailed till to-day."

It must have surely been something more than common friendship that had prompted this trip of Mr. Carrington's; and, having painfully learnt a little wisdom in such matters, Mr. Vaughan looked from one to the other of the faces by his side. He saw nothing melting the sad sternness of his daughter's, however, and breathed more freely as he said, "We were not much more fortunate. Through a mistake of Harry's we only arrived in time to see the vessel moving off."

The remembrance of the scene of yesterday brought bitter tears to the eyes of Constance, which she had to turn away to hide.

"And when do you intend to return?" inquired Carrington, after a painful silence.

"By this morning's express," replied Mr. Vaughan. "We came out before breakfast to take a farewell look," and he nodded out toward the distant horizon.

"I should have been glad to return with you," said Mr. Carrington, "but as I only travelled up yesterday, and have been on the move for the last four and twenty hours, I fear I must remain and get a few hours' rest."

It did not appear that Constance was taking the slightest notice of him, though the last words were spoken at her, and



in a decidedly injured tone—a tone which Constance had often mocked in the happy days of old.

At last he addressed her directly. “I did not know till yesterday that your friend had gone also. Did you see her before she sailed?”

Then he had not received her note. It was, in all probability, lying at his chambers. Constance could not but look her desire for explanation as these thoughts passed through her mind. “I parted from her in London,” she answered, “hoping to see her again; but we were too late to get on board—indeed, they would not have allowed us; every one not going with the ship had been sent on shore. Kate and I had to part quite suddenly at last, and in the confusion I did not even catch a glimpse of Esther, though she must have been standing on the deck.”

“We lost sight of Kate too,” said Mr. Vaughan; “in fact, we could see nothing but a crowd of people waving hats and handkerchiefs—black figures standing out against a brilliant evening sky. Even had the light been better, poor Constance would not have seen much, I fear,” he added, looking tenderly at her.

The three walked on together, Mr. Carrington going over to the side of Constance. “Let us hope the parting is only for a time,” he said, gently. “Harry is sure to come back again; the distance is nothing nowadays.”

He spoke as if the antipodes might be reached in a Long Vacation tour. The tone of hope and energy was new to her, and she raised her eyes to his face, the tears standing on their thick lashes. He comforted her, and unconsciously she accepted the comfort. They stood nearer to each other than they had ever done before.

“You will come and breakfast with us?” said Mr. Vaughan.

“Unless,” Constance put in, with that touch of womanly

care which so often wins a man's heart by its betrayal of interest in his personal concerns—" unless Mr. Carrington would prefer to rest ; he looks quite worn out."

" I think I shall go back to London with you after all," said that gentleman.

" But you have just travelled down," said Mr. Vaughan.

" And travelled up only the day before," said Constance, showing that she had been paying attention to him after all.

" I'll tell you what we shall do," said Mr. Vaughan, kindly ; " we will stay here another day. I should like to stay here another day," and his eyes went seaward wistfully. " You shall go and rest now," and he laid his hand on the young man's shoulder as they came up to the door of the hotel, " and come and dine with us in the evening. To-morrow we can all go up together."





## CHAPTER LI.

### BAD TIDINGS.

**T**HE daily paper did not reach Redhurst until after breakfast, so Mr. Vaughan escaped the temptation, common to other men, to obscure himself behind the broad sheet during a moiety of the meal. Against this temptation Mr. Walton was not proof; but Milly tolerated this, and all his other failings, with more than patience—indeed, had been even heard to commend the objectionable practice, and to pick up contentedly the crumbs of intelligence which fell from the lips of her lord and master. Constance, on the other hand, could not endure it, and now that she was left alone with her father, she regularly cut the paper in two, and shared the reading of it with him.

It was now five days since the departure of Kate and Harry, and life was returning into its ordinary channels. Father and daughter had breakfasted together with tolerable cheerfulness, and had even talked of taking up their usual tasks, which had been laid aside for a time. After breakfast, as usual, the damp, folded sheet was handed in by a maid-servant, and seized by Constance with a faint return of her usual avidity. So dies in human hearts the thought of parting—the furrows follow for a while the wake of the vessels, but only to be effaced at last.

There was still a fire in the breakfast-room, for the weather had been unusually cold and stormy, and Constance spread the paper before the grate, while she stood on the hearth-rug dividing it with her paper-knife.

"There is your half," she said, cheerfully, handing the sheet to her father; "you like the summary first."

"Yes, I like to choose what I shall read," he replied, with almost equal cheerfulness.

Constance smiled, for he accused her of reading what she called "the horrors." Then, as he settled himself in his chair, she went off with her portion into her favourite nook in the window behind him.

There was silence in the room for a few minutes, only broken by the rustling of the paper in their hands; but at the end of that time Mr. Vaughan was startled by a deep groan and a heavy fall. He looked round in terror, and saw Constance lying in a heap on the floor. She had fainted. Mr. Vaughan's alarm was not unnatural. Thanks to fresh air and exercise, to freedom from care, and well-disciplined minds, the young ladies of Redhurst were not given to fainting fits. Mr. Vaughan had never seen one of his daughters faint, and Constance had always been the most robust of the three.

If he had looked round the minute before, he would have seen her rise to her feet, and, clasping her hands with a look of agony, vainly frame her lips to speak. Ringing the bell for the servants, Mr. Vaughan hastened to raise her, or, rather, to lay her in an easier posture. But she did not long remain insensible. She soon opened her eyes, and took the draught of water which the maid held to her lips. They lifted her to a sofa, and laid her there, and still she could not speak; though with the return of consciousness came the return of the agony, which again convulsed her face. At length she found relief in weeping. Her

father, attributing her suffering to physical pain, proposed that the doctor should be sent for; but she shook her head, and at length found voice enough to ask the maid to leave her. Then, pointing to the paper, she cried out, through her tears, "Oh, poor papa!"

Agitated and grieved as he was, Mr. Vaughan lifted the paper from the floor to place it on the table, without in the least connecting it with his daughter's sudden illness; but as he did so a heading in large letters met his eye—

**"FOUNDERING OF THE CITY!**

**TERRIBLE LOSS OF LIFE!"**

It was his turn to drop the silent messenger of evil tidings. "My child!—my child!" he cried, burying his head in his hands, and flinging himself on his knees by the side of Constance.

She could only repeat, "Poor papa!"

There were no other words uttered between them that morning.

Over the first agonising grief a veil must be drawn. No one witnessed it, and they never spoke of it—never told how they gained courage to read the awful story, and to quench the last spark of hope as they learnt that only a few of the sailors had escaped, that all the rest of that great company had perished. Such things cannot be told. We only know that, from time to time, they must be suffered.

To not a few households in England that morning's paper carried the like heartrending anguish and dismay. Mr. Walton sat opposite to his fair young wife as she poured out his coffee, and was glad to know that his face was concealed from her behind the page, as he read the terrible news. With the paper rustling in his trembling hands, he looked up at her, dreading to communicate the intelligence which would quench those pleasant smiles for

many a morning to come. Once and again he fixed his eyes on the headings with a kind of fascination, and tried to speak. And when at last he said, "Milly, my darling!" in a tone so choked and uncertain, and unlike his own, that she rose and came over to his side, he was forced to allow her to read for herself, only flinging an arm about her in silence, and clasping her to his heart at the moment when she saw it all.

After the first burst of sorrow, nothing would satisfy her but to go at once to her father; and Herbert, finding it impossible to leave her, accompanied her thither. They felt, both of them, that the shock which they had suffered, severe as it was, had come to them through the resisting medium of their own happiness—a happiness which, in its perfect circle, isolated them to a certain extent from the whole world, and that Constance and her father would suffer infinitely more.

Mr. Carrington, too, read the announcement at the breakfast-table, and startled his mother by an exclamation of horror—startled her out of her morning quiet, and took away her peace and comfort for the rest of the day. She was certainly awe-stricken and sorrowful on account of the three young people whom she had known and seen so lately in the bloom of youth and beauty; but her principal concern was for her son, who, pale as death, had hurried out of the house, in the midst of her lamentations, leaving his breakfast wholly untasted.

He, too, was speedily on his way to Redhurst, to offer his services to the Vaughans, in case there was anything to be done.

But there was nothing. In ordinary cases of bereavement there is always something to do, in the doing of which the first violence of sorrow finds vent, and is relieved; but for those whom the sea has devoured there are

no last rites to be paid ; no last looks can be taken of their faces ; no flowers can be strewn upon their bodies ; left in the depths,

“ To toss with tangle and with shells,”

nothing remains to be done for them but to sit down and weep.

The evening papers confirmed the intelligence, and gave the particulars of the disaster, as taken down from the mouths of the survivors.

For the first two days after leaving Plymouth the weather had been moderate ; but on the second night it began to blow, and before morning one of the masts of the ship had been carried away. All day the gale continued with unabated fury, and one by one the other masts went overboard, hanging over the sides of the heavily-laden ship a mass of timber and cordage. A vain attempt was made to secure them, but the gale blew harder than ever, and the lurching vessel shipped heavier and heavier seas. As long as the engine-pumps kept going there had been hope, but at length a tremendous sea rushed down into the saloon, and the fires in the engine-room were extinguished. Then the boats had been got out, and the attempt made to save as many as possible. As usual, however, the boats were unworkable, and first one and then another was swamped as soon as lowered. None but sailors would enter the only remaining boat, which pulled off in safety from the foundering ship, and in a few minutes saw her sink, and all on board perish.

This was the narrative of the survivors, as given in the public prints, and there seemed nothing more to be learnt. But the sailors had been brought up to London, and Mr. Carrington took upon himself the melancholy task of visiting them, to see if he could learn anything concerning the dear peculiar few in whose fate he and his friends were so

deeply interested. All that he could hope for was some mournful, perhaps harrowing glimpse of them in the last extremity, but even that seemed better than the indiscriminate silence.

One of the men was sure that he remembered Harry helping to clear the ship.

"A young man with hair and beard as bright as gold," prompted Carrington.

"Ay, sir; as bright as his watch-chain, and it glittered in the sun."

"And dressed in blue?"

"Dressed in blue, sir; and a capital sailor. It wasn't the first time he had been to sea. Could keep his feet, and take a wetting, like any old salt." The sailor added touches which showed him light as foam to the last.

But as for the women, the sailors remembered none of them. It was too early in the voyage to get acquainted with the looks of the passengers. Very few had even been on deck. They had mostly kept to their cabins and said their prayers, and given wonderful little trouble.

"And that same golden-haired young man," again prompted Carrington, with quivering lips; "had he any one with him—had he a wife?"

"Yes, he had a wife below; but for that, he would have been with us. We could have taken him, but he wouldn't leave her, though we tried to persuade him. The passengers were either afraid to trust the boat, or they had some one on board they wouldn't leave, sir. He was one o' them. He wouldn't leave her; though for once he looked a little white like as he watched us shoving off."

"And then?"

"And then, sir, he went below," and the spokesman paused with a look in his face which put an end to further questioning.



This was something for Mr. Carrington's pains. Harry had refused to leave Kate at last. Perhaps, in the supreme hour of separation, there had come to them a union of spirit which had gone far to take away the bitterness of death.

Concerning Esther all was blank.





## CHAPTER LII.

### LOVE AND LOSS.

**T**HERE was no reserve among the friends at Redhurst now. Each knew the other's sorest trial and loss. Mr. Vaughan's self-upbraidings found their counterpart in those of Mr. Carrington.

The sorrow of both had in it that element of a haunting regret which gives more of lasting desolation to the heart than anything else ; but, in its manifestations, Mr. Vaughan's grief was more like remorse. He blamed himself for having urged Kate to go with her husband. If he had but listened to her prayer, she would have been with him now, instead of gone from him for ever. From the expressions which he let fall, Constance could see how he was dwelling on this thought. It was, indeed, rapidly prostrating him, both in body and mind. He had presumed once more to take upon himself the direction of another's life, and with what a result !—a result at once immediate and final.

It was a very dangerous channel of thought for a mind so sensitive and distrustful of itself to pursue—one into which only such minds are apt to fall. The self-sufficient of the world pass every day, not over the dead bodies, but over the dead souls—dead to faith, and hope, and charity—which they had helped to slay, murmuring, triumphantly, "Am I my brother's keeper?" But such as Mr. Vaughan

feel the pressure of their responsibility for others to the furthest issues of their lightest acts. He once confessed that he could not look a beggar in the face and deny him an alms—as he felt bound to do, because his reason condemned an indiscriminate charity—without being haunted by the misgiving that the refusal might be one stroke more in the bitter process of hardening a human heart.

It was no fanciful alarm which Constance felt, and communicated to Mr. Carrington, when she found her father brooding on such thoughts as these. Every feeling of self died out of her heart in the intensity of her care for him, and she consulted Mr. Carrington as freely as if he had been a brother; and in those dark days he proved himself worthy of her trust. Always pervaded by a tender melancholy, which formed the background on which the light of his intellect and fancy played, there was reason to fear that Mr. Vaughan's mind might sink into hopeless gloom.

"If I had but allowed her to stay," was the constant burden of his thoughts. His intellect seemed to centre more and more on that terrible "if." His fancy lost its spring; he sat like a man who has been paralysed, looking straight before him, hour after hour—looking, and yet seeing nothing. No wonder that Constance was alarmed.

Between Mr. Walton's strongly-marked mind, taking dark enough views of life and human nature sometimes, but always at home in the region of the practical and practicable, and that of Mr. Vaughan, there had always been a slight dissonance. It now came out clearer than ever, when the more sensitive spirit was rendered still more sensitive by suffering. Mr. Walton did him harm, rather than good.

It was Mr. Carrington who proved Constance's best ally in sustaining her father's spirit. Every hour he could spare he spent with them, and in their service. He told

Mr. Vaughan the story of his love and loss, and of his everlasting regret. The part he had played towards Esther, though a more passive one than that which Mr. Vaughan had acted towards his daughter, was yet similar enough to allow of a deep sympathy between the elder and the younger man. But their natural positions seemed to have been reversed. It was the younger who brought the power of a broadly Christian philosophy to bear upon their common sorrow.

It has been said that there was no reserve among the friends; and there was none, except on the part of Constance, and that was the sacred secret of her love, which she had buried in her heart, and which seemed, somehow, to belong entirely to the past, and to make a part of its sweetness, as well as of its pain. It gave her no pain in the present.

It was a lovely morning. Spring was abroad, filling the garden with blossom and sunshine and song. And it was Sunday. They were going to the village church together—father and daughter and friend, and the two latter had stepped out into the garden a little before the time. Constance was clad, for the first time, in black. She had been so quiet in her sorrow hitherto, that no special sympathy had been offered to her by her companion. She had seemed to give rather than to seek support. They walked, in silence, a little way down a side walk that led to the orchard, the sunshine falling on their path. The place was one flush of beauty—one chorus of song. The birds sang as if they would leave no pause in their singing.

"The world is too sad for this!" said Constance, calmly; but before her companion could answer, she had stopped and burst into a passion of weeping. It was as if her own voice had called it forth.

"Dear Constance," said Mr. Carrington, tenderly, "you have needed sympathy, and I have been selfishly claiming it from you."

He tried to comfort her, but it seemed that he was powerless. She stood among the blossoms shaken with passionate sobs. The birds sang on with persistent piercing sweetness ; Mr. Carrington uttered an involuntary " Hush ! " over which, at any other time, he would have smiled. Now he knew not what to do, unless he, too, could have wept.

" Your father must not find you thus," he whispered, at last.

" No," she answered, checking her sobs at once, and adding a murmur of thanks for the reminder. " I shall be better now ; " and she proceeded, turning half aside from him, to dry her eyes, and to pull her crape veil over her tear-stained face.

" How poor our attempts at comfort are," he said, as they moved on again in the direction she indicated—deeper still among blossomed trees.

" No, no ; you have comforted us greatly," she replied. " You have sustained my father as I could not have done. You, too, are greatly changed by this suffering."

" For the better, I hope," he said.

" Yes, for the better," she answered, simply.

" I do not feel it as you thought I should ? " He was only leading her away from herself in asking the question.

" No."

" How did you think it would affect me ? "

" More as it has done my father—with a paralysis of hopelessness. More as I felt just now, that sunshine, and blossom, and promise, and all putting forth of power, were vain things in a life that any moment might overwhelm."

" I have felt that often enough before, in the presence of such calamities, when they fell far away from the sphere of my life, and touched me nowhere. Shall I tell you what I feel now, when it has smitten me ? I feel my life consecrated by the touch ; it seems as if it belonged to her, and must not any longer be a worthless thing to others—must

not any longer be a thing to be idly thrown away. It has somehow lost its littleness, and become related to a larger life beyond. It has lost its littleness, and yet gained in individuality." He had spoken, as if musing, rapidly and eloquently. Then he added, in the lower tone of a confidence imparted, "If I may say it, I feel as if my life had been touched with a touch of divine power, and must henceforth belong to Him who gave it."

And Constance noticed that he uncovered his head, and bent it reverently, as he uttered the last words.

Then they turned to meet Mr. Vaughan, who was coming towards them, and Mr. Carrington hastened to offer him his arm, with the air of an affectionate son towards a stricken father. You would not before have called the latter "an old man;" you would have spoken of him as such to-day.

At the first opportunity Mr. Carrington sought out Philip, for the two young men had pledged themselves to friendship. He went to Philip's lodging, but he was not there. "He has moved away from us," said the meek, poverty-stricken landlady; adding, in a tone of regret, "but I can tell you where he works."

Following the direction she gave, he went on to the workshop, and found Philip there. The workshop was a great square, enclosed by brick walls, and lighted from the roof. Fires were burning, blown by huge bellows, and hammers were ringing on every side.

Philip stood at an anvil near the doorway, raining thick blows on a piece of glowing iron. Mr. Carrington stood watching him till he came to a pause in his operations, and became conscious at the same time that some one was watching him.

"I suppose I must not detain you now," said Carrington, after a friendly greeting had passed between them. "Tell me where you live, and I will come and see you."

"I am on piece-work," Philip replied, "and can talk to you while this bar is heating;" and he thrust the piece of iron into the fire again, while he leant his weight on the beam of the bellows, and sent a shower of sparks up from the glowing furnace. "You must speak loud to be heard here;" he added, "and yet your words won't reach anybody else's ears."

"Why have you gone away from the old place?" asked Carrington, abruptly. Conversation conducted here was likely to be direct, at least.

"I have gone down east," he replied. "There's a band of us working down there."

"Will you give me work?" said Carrington.

"And welcome. What will you do?"

"Whatever I am fit for."

"That's the thing."

When they had exchanged these brief sentences, the conversation came to an end. It was significant that neither of them spoke of the lost.

But two or three days after, when they met by appointment in Philip's East-end lodging, to which Carrington went straight from his chambers, while his mother drove off to a dinner-party in solitary state, an allusion was made to the sad event—the first and the last allusion to it which passed between them.

Philip was cutting out work for Carrington, and was led to speak of the clergyman of the district. "He wants to know if we are sound before he will countenance and encourage us."

"And what did you tell him?"

"I told him our programme was very simple. To preach to these heathen nations what the Master preached—the love of the Father, and the salvation from sin!"

Carrington smiled. "And was he satisfied?"

"Not quite. He thought these were all well enough as far as they went; 'But,' he said, 'we are drifting into a sea of nothingness, Mr. Ward, where we ought to be quite sure of our ground.' "

"Rather difficult work," said Carrington. "Well?"

"I told him simply that we could not despair of reaching land, if the Master was on board. He is a good man, in spite of bad metaphor," added Philip. "Christian men sometimes forget that hope is a Christian duty—hope for self, and church, and world, a duty next to faith, perhaps greater, since charity is the greatest, and hope is nearer to charity. And there's no such thing as a sea of nothingness. We are all sailing on the ocean of Divine Love. No bad thing to be swallowed up in that."

Carrington understood the pathetic look on his companion's face, and both remained for a moment silent and sorrowful.







## CHAPTER LIII.

### TURNUED BACR.

**W**E must now turn back to the time when we left Mary Potter and her children on board of the doomed vessel, with the faithful Timothy in attendance. As the day went on the confusion around them seemed only to become worse confounded, and Mary, with her girls gathered around her, and Johnny kept as closely as possible by her side, was fain to sit within the cabin and keep clear of the little world of chaos which reigned without. Martin and Willie, as well as Bob and Walter, were abroad in the midst of it, and were evidently, especially the latter pair, enjoying the excitement of the stirring scene. From time to time they made their appearance to report on all that was going forward. The two elder brothers, with the laudable purpose of comforting their mother, brought her every agreeable bit of intelligence they could find, the soothing effect of which was generally neutralised by the younger pair rushing in breathless to communicate something of quite the opposite tendency. "An awfully jolly row" was the least alarming of these communications. Mary was glad when the day came to a close, and the sound of carpenters' saws and hammers ceased, even though Timothy Wiggett left the ship with the rest of the visitors. He left, promising to come again in the morning; he was to spend the night in Gravesend for

the purpose, and Mary was glad that she was to see his broad beaming face once more, with its silent but perfect sympathy. Little Mary had continued ill and feverish and fretful. Johnny, too, was unusually dull and heavy. Before night it became apparent that both the children had caught heavy colds, and Timothy Wiggett had proved himself most efficient as a nurse, though he trusted rather too much to the agency of pink bull's-eyes and other wonderful productions of a like order.

Morning came at last, after a distressing night, during which the ailing children had suffered no one in their immediate neighbourhood to close an eye. Little Mary especially had tossed and tumbled and cried and fretted the whole night long, and when the morning came her fair face and neck were red as fire. Her mother suspected what it was, and as soon as possible caused inquiry to be made for the doctor. He was not yet on board, but was coming that morning to inspect the passengers, and Mary was assured that he should see her children first. Timothy Wiggett was there before him, having previously ransacked the town for all the good things he could think of in the way of cakes and confections. But from all good things whatever poor little Mary turned away her head, while Johnny took them, and cried because he found himself unable to devour them as usual.

At length the doctor came, a frank, firm-looking man, who spoke in tones of clear decision, as if accustomed to his will being made law. He had hardly looked at the children when he raised his head, saying, "They must be turned back!"

Mary looked at him as if she hardly comprehended.

"They must be got out of the ship as quickly as possible," he added. "They are both in scarlet fever, and of course they cannot be allowed to go."

Mary took in the idea of her children's danger, but nothing beyond. It was some time before she thought of all which this turning back involved.

"And you, young woman," said the doctor, turning to Sarah, "what is the matter with you?"

"Nothing," faltered the poor girl, who was holding her little brother's head.

But the firm man looked in her eyes and into her mouth, and shook his head over her also. He then gave Mary some directions, and went off to speak to the master of the vessel concerning their immediate removal. Esther came forward, and offered to go with him to see the matter settled. She stated their circumstances briefly.

"It is very hard in this case, certainly," said the doctor; "but I cannot, for the sake of one family, allow a virulent disease to enter the ship, and endanger the lives of one half the passengers."

He spoke as if there was no appeal from his decision; and indeed Esther felt that there was none. The master of the ship was even more peremptory than the doctor. "They must leave at once."

As they arrived at this conclusion, Esther was joined by her elder brothers, alarmed and eager. She introduced them to the doctor, who, on examination, pronounced in their favour.

"They, at least, need not turn back."

All the other members of the family passed in review before this arbiter of their fate, and were one by one pronounced safe, especially as he ascertained that only their mother, and Sarah, and Esther had been in very close contact with the sick children for several days.

It was an excited group that gathered round Mary and the little ones, to decide on what was to be done. With regard to them and to Sarah, no choice was left; they

must obey the mandate issued against them, and leave the ship immediately. Orders had already been issued for the return of their passage money, and of everything belonging to them. The question debated was, Should all turn back together and wait for the next ship, or should Martin and Willie, with their two younger brothers, be allowed to proceed, and let the rest follow?

The master of the vessel, who had joined the party in order to expedite matters, and the young men and boys themselves, took the latter view, and urged it strongly on the poor bewildered mother. It was like fighting against fate, this trying to keep her family together, and Mary always went down in a fight with anything. Assured that the children would be well again in a week or two, and that she and they would follow the others in less than a month, she suffered herself to be overruled, and hardly protested when the twins, who had been consulting together, declared their wish to go with their brothers.

"Esther will take care of you, mother," Martin had said. "We can go quite comfortably when we know she is with you."

And Mary made no further opposition. Martin had more power over his brothers and sisters than she had, and would take as anxious care for their welfare; and for the present she was absorbed in watching the lambs of her flock, over whom the vulture Death seemed to her already hovering.

Timothy Wiggett, who had stood apart during the eager conference, now came forward with his timely aid. It was he who carried little Mary on shore, wrapped in a blanket, and screened from light and air; while Martin, privately informed that the ship would not sail for hours, if at all that day, and allowed to accompany them on shore, on condition of undergoing a process of disinfection, carried his little brother in the same fashion. The parting with

the others took place on board the ship, and, in the bustle and excitement, was brief and bewildering—one of those things only half realised at the time, to be felt all the more acutely after, like a sudden wound which is almost painless in the giving.

With difficulty they got a small, plain lodging, no one liking to take fever patients. But a childless widow took them in at last, through Timothy's persuasive powers, which certainly did not lie in his tongue. The children and Sarah were soon in bed, and under a doctor's care, the former slightly, the latter exceedingly, ill, though in appearance the cases had been quite reversed.

Then it was time for Martin to return to the ship, though he lingered to the last. After parting with his mother—and Mary seemed parting from all her children in parting with him—Esther walked down with him to the shore. The fine manly young fellow could hardly keep from crying along the streets. Esther leaned upon his arm as they walked together, their hearts too full for speech.

"You will take care of mother," were the first and almost the last words he said.

She gave the promise he seemed to require, and they wrung each other's hands in silence.

The last Esther saw of him was his tall, slim figure standing up in the boat, and waving good-bye. Her tears fell freely under her veil as she paced the streets back to their lodgings.





## CHAPTER LIV.

### PEACE AFTER STORM.

**W**HEN the terrible news of the foundering of the *City* came to Mary Potter she was hanging over the sick-bed of her daughter Sarah, who was, indeed, dangerously ill. The children, who had taken the disease in its mildest form, were up and about again, almost as well as ever, while she, poor girl, had progressed rapidly from bad to worse.

When the cup is full it runs over, and the human heart cannot hold more than a certain amount of sorrow; what is over remains unfelt. Great calamities are to be measured by the length of time in which they involve us in suffering, rather than by the intensity of the suffering they cause. Some griefs stretch their black shadows over whole lives; others but darken a short passage of our history.

Under the grim shadow of that great disaster, Mary Potter will walk to her life's end. She knew not, indeed, how she bore it and lived; for long after she could hardly be said to live, so dead was she to everything about her. Her strength decayed, her beauty withered, she seemed to stoop as if with age, and her beautiful hair became in a few months thin and grey.

Timothy Wiggett was not with them when the shock came. He had stayed as long as he could, and returned commissioned to see Constance Vaughan, and explain to her

how matters stood. On his first visit the Vaughans were absent, and on the second he was met by the tidings of the disaster, and turned away because neither father nor daughter was able to see him. The next day he was back at Gravesend, arranging with Esther that the whole family—all that now remained of it—should come to him as soon as Sarah could be moved. As for Mary, she could take no part in any arrangement, but was helpless as a child.

When Constance learned from Esther herself that she was still in the land of the living, it was with singular feelings of mingled pleasure and pain. To both Constance and her father the tidings came with a fresh shock. It was like tearing open a closing wound. But though it thus for a time intensified their pain, it also roused them to a deeper and more conscious resignation to the will of God. Esther was speedily pressed to take up her abode with her old friends, and her coming back to Redhurst gave a fresh impulse to the sympathy which is the only cure for an overwhelming sorrow to hearts like Mr. Vaughan's.

It was not long before Esther roused herself to look to the future. The money which had come to her, diminished as it had been by the expenses of their outfit, would not long suffice for the whole family, and they could not always trespass upon the kindness of friends. But she could not rouse her mother. She seemed to turn away with a kind of loathing from the future, and from any exertion connected with it.

Timothy, too, was averse to change. "Mary," he said, "was a good housekeeper." Sarah was most useful; it was, in reality, Sarah who did all that was wanted; "and, seeing that he paid them nothing, he had an excellent bargain. The two little chaps counted for nothing; he threw away as much garden stuff as they required for grub." Thus they went on, and Esther's purpose was postponed from month to month.







"The sound that greeted her was an unmistakeable sob."

It was some time after her return before Mr. Carrington and Esther met. It was natural that a reaction should follow the kind of exaltation that had come upon him. It did follow speedily; but he had been carried by that one high tide of feeling out of himself for ever. He sank into a state of deep melancholy, but it was a far other and nobler melancholy than he had before indulged in. He went about a few days looking desperately ill. His mother fidgeted, and, to satisfy her, he saw the family doctor, who looked grave, and prescribed cheerfulness without excitement. He forgot to say where the tonic was to be procured.

One day, Mrs. Carrington came in from her round of calls. She found from signs in the hall that her son had returned before her. With her light brisk step she passed ~~at~~ once into his study. It was on the ground-floor, and she gave no warning ere she entered. To her consternation, the sound that greeted her was an unmistakable sob, and the sight she saw was her son with his head bent, and in utter abandonment, crying like a child. Very much alarmed and distressed, she nevertheless stepped back behind the door, called to him that she had returned, and went away as if she had neither seen nor heard. But as soon as she had given him time to recover himself—for the old lady hated a scene, and, indeed, it was the last thing in the world which her son would have chosen to encounter—she came in again, taking care to enter less softly.

"I was coming up to you," he said, in his usual tone. "See," and he held forth a letter.

It was from Constance, to tell that Esther was safe—was coming back, as it were, from the dead. She had observed no precaution in her announcement, and the shock had been too much for him at the moment. An attack of serious illness followed. The excitement, and consequent

depression, which the shock and counter-shock had caused, had brought on a functional derangement of the heart.

Nor was Esther ignorant of his suffering, and its cause ; Constance, holding her knowledge no longer as a secret, had told her all. For his sufferings, Esther expressed the truest sympathy ; for the cause of them, only a deep regret.

After the first painful interview, which took place as soon as Mr. Carrington had sufficiently recovered, they seemed to meet as friends, and they met thus more and more frequently as the summer advanced. In the midst of the summer splendour of the Redhurst garden they often walked together—"Two wan, sick figures walking alone in the flowery land." Not that Esther was sick, but she was pale with dwelling under the shadow of her own and others' sorrows. As for her companion, it was sorrowful to see him so faded in his youth.

All of a sudden he appeared to revive. The air of the Redhurst garden seemed to furnish the tonic he required. He recovered his cheerfulness, resumed his old interests and his new work with fresh vigour. At first Mr. Vaughan had desired him to come to them for his own sake, now he encouraged his visits, as a means of enlivening the sadness that brooded over the house. He himself was content to go on under the shadow, but could not bear to see Constance and her friend so grave and sorrowful.

But at length Esther announced her determination of going out as a teacher in a school, in which she was about to place little Mary, and it was on learning this determination of hers that Mr. Carrington spoke out.

It was a soft, sad October day. The leaves were quietly fluttering down one by one. The gossamers in the garden, stretched from shrub to shrub, were strung with tiny beads of dew, and resembled nets of woven pearls. No bird sang ; everything was still and mute. Constance was en-

gaged somewhere, and Carrington, by Esther's side, pacing up and down the well-known garden at Redhurst. They, too, were sad and mute, for they were thinking of the past.

"Why should you not wait till spring?" said Carrington at last, somewhat abruptly. It was so long since he had spoken, that Esther had to recollect herself, before she could bring to mind that he was speaking of her resolution to face the world again.

"The longer I stay the more difficult it will be to go," she answered, with a grave smile.

"Why should you go at all?" he said, stopping at the end of their walk, and seeking to meet her eyes. "Esther, my love, be mine."

She did not answer, and her eyes were fixed upon the ground; but at least there was no repulsion in her attitude, and the expression of her troubled face, if grave, was tender; therefore he went on to plead for an answer. He urged her to help him to the new life which her love had inspired—the life of grave and manly effort, and of grave and manly joy.

"I do not ask you," he said, "to share with me a life of selfish pleasure, but one of self-denying work. If it is too early to ask you to forget your sorrow, I will wait—indeed," he added, "I do not ask you to forget it at all, but to let me more fully sympathise with it. If you do not, cannot care for me——"

And his voice plainly told what despair such a sentence would be. He paused and waited.

"I do care for you," she murmured; "but——"

He would not suffer the objection, whatever it might be. "There can be nothing else," he exclaimed, eagerly, "to hinder my happiness. I have loved none but you."

She seemed at these words to shrink from him more than she had done before.

"You shall judge," she said, slowly, "what hinders me." And with a delicate blush on her downcast face she gave him the history of her feelings towards Philip Ward. Beginning at the time when she first knew him, she told her lover of the attraction which Philip had exercised over her, and related what had passed between them at their parting.

Mr. Carrington's face brightened as she went on.

"You never really loved him," he exclaimed.

"But until lately I thought I could," she answered, quickly. "He is so good, so tender, so exalted. It was his face I should have seen in visions if I had gone to that distant land—if I had gone down in that sinking ship."

She raised her eloquent eyes to his bravely.

"If," he replied. "But now?" and he smiled in triumph as the eyes fell before his. "God knows," he said, as they returned up the walk hand in hand, "Philip is nobler and worthier than I; but you will love me none the worse for having been able to think so tenderly of him. Confess that the feeling is not quite the same—that this is something new."

What was confessed need not be repeated; but in the hearts of both was established the peace of a sure and steadfast love, as they returned to the house together.

And our brave Constance had conquered too, for she rejoiced in the happiness of her friends, as she took her place by her father's side. Her attitude towards him that evening, when they were all together, and the lovers drew near to each other, was like an assurance that she, at least, would never leave him, but find her happiness in his alone.

It was settled that the marriage of Esther and Mr. Carrington should not take place till the spring, and Esther was to remain with her friends till then.

Mrs. Carrington, who liked being generous, especially if opposed in her purpose, made over a large part of her

fortune to her son, in his own despite. She had enough for herself; besides, she declared it would embitter her life to see him living in poverty.

Mary Potter could not be brought to part with her children, even to send them to school. She taught them herself, and Mr. Carrington had speedily set at rest Esther's fears for their future. But before her marriage they were provided for in another and most unexpected way. Sarah sought her sister one day, in a state of trembling eagerness, to communicate the great intelligence, that their mother was going to be married again.

It seemed the best thing for her after all. Changed and sorrow-stricken as she was, she was still the same to Timothy Wiggett, and he had promised that she should never be parted from her remaining children, whom he had treated, and would always treat, as his own. And Mary knew that she could trust him, and lean upon him always, and gave her placid consent, which consent was enough however, to fill honest Timothy's heart with joy as full as it could hold; and the heart in that broad body of his was none of the smallest.

THE END.



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40. Handsome Brass Capped and Cornered Case, containing two Trays, with the following highly-finished Instruments in German Silver, viz. : Compass, with two knee joints and needle points, Pen and Pencil, Needle Hair Spring Divider, three Needle Pointed Spring Bows, Ink and Pencil Bow, with double knee joints, Needle Point, Tracing Point on ivory handle, Jointed and Steel Pens, Proportional Compass, three Ivory Rules . . . . .	105	0

LUDGATE HILL, LONDON; AND 596, BROADWAY, NEW YORK.

## *Superfine Water Colours,*

FOR LANDSCAPES, FIGURES, AND FLOWERS.

*In Mahogany, with Sliding Top.*

No.		s.	d.
1.	Improved Colours, 12 Cakes, Brush and Saucers . . . . .	0	4
6.	The Boy's Box of Colours, 12 Cakes, Brush and Saucers . . . . .	0	6
7.	The Shilling Colour Box, 14 Cakes, Brush and Saucers . . . . .	1	0
8.	The Universal Colour Box, 18 Cakes, Brush and Saucers . . . . .	1	9
9.	The Educator Colour Box, 27 Cakes, Brush and Saucers . . . . .	3	0

### COLOURS FREE FROM POISON.

*In Mahogany, with Sliding Top, Polished Boxes.*

120.	Containing 9 large Cakes, Brush, Crayons, and Saucers . . . . .	1	0
115.	Containing 15 small Cakes, Brushes, Crayons, and Saucers . . . . .	1	4
117.	Containing 15 large Cakes, Brushes, Crayons, and Saucers . . . . .	2	3
119.	Containing 9 large Cakes, Compass, Stumps, Crayons, &c. . . . .	2	6

*In Highly Polished Boxes.*

43.	Containing 18 large Cakes, Brushes, Crayons, and Saucers . . . . .	4	0
53.	Containing 15 large Cakes, Brushes, Crayons, and Saucers . . . . .	5	0
55.	Containing 15 middle Cakes, Brushes, Crayons, &c., lock and key . . . . .	5	6
54.	Containing 18 large Cakes, Brushes, Crayons, &c., lock and key . . . . .	7	6
57.	Containing 15 middle Cakes, in a handsome Case, inlaid with brass, Brushes, Crayons, Stumps, Glue, Gold and Silver Shells, Saucers, &c., lock and key . . . . .	9	6

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